Separated Yet Still Together

By: Margie Chachkin
Adoptive Mom and FCU Member

When living under the same roof, brothers and sisters may take for granted that they are there for one another. But children living in a foster care home with little or no contact with immediate family can realize a significant loss when they are separated from a sibling(s). Many would consider this an unnatural break in a family's dynamic.

I'd like to suggest that young people who find themselves in this situation can maintain a close bond and continue to be a force in each other's lives.

Foster parents of siblings who are separated can help support these efforts, and are encouraged to do so when it is in the best interest of the child's healthy development.

Some ways to keep in touch are through letter writing and social media. Special days such as birthdays, should be remembered and celebrated by a phone call or card. Other holidays that are shared among peers, like Halloween and Valentine's Day, offer an opportunity for sibling fun even if from afar. As practical and common-sense as these suggestions are, for various reasons there may be blocks that keep sibling relationships from continuing on their natural path when living in separate homes.

One goal in any relationship is to build positive memories. Children do not have the power to turn the clock back, however they do have the ability to have a memorable presence in their siblings lives today.

Foster parents, social workers, and anyone involved in the case of a child who is separated from a brother or sister can make a difference in the short and long-term, by providing guidance and focusing on 'Still Together.'

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

-Mahatma Gandhi
CONSULTANT AND TRAINER BIRTHDAYS

APRIL

Kristin Shatz  April 4
Wendy Hoverter  April 5
Patricia Hackman  April 7
Heidi Ciano  April 12
Amy Flite  April 20
David Fratta  April 23
Patricia Flood  April 28

MAY

Patricia Gadsden  May 14
Jo Sterner  May 14
Krysta Heffner  May 26
Michelle Rager  May 26
June Fisher  May 31
Elaine Newkirk  May 31
Traditionally, Mother’s Day is a day to honor our mothers and tell them how thankful we are to have them in our lives. For many people, this scenario will happen. For many foster children and birth moms, it will not. This is usually a very difficult day for many children in our foster care system and for their biological moms that still yearn to hold them and to have them home again. Some children do not have any contact with their biological mothers while others have minimal contact through visitation. Whatever the case may be, Mother’s Day can be a difficult day.

No mom sets out to have her child or children removed from her care. I believe whole heartedly that all moms love their children. Sometimes for whatever reason, they just can’t take care of them or provide for them. Maybe they don’t have the support of family or friends. Maybe they had a difficult childhood themselves and haven’t learned how to properly parent a child or perhaps they have been victims of domestic violence.

On days like Mother’s Day, some of these children often continue to idealize their mothers. They forget about the bruises, the hunger, the drugs and alcohol. Instead they remember how soft their mother’s hair was, or how good she smelled. They will remember the time she took them for ice cream for no special reason. For some children it may be hearing a song on the radio that reminds them of something special. This can be a very confusing and difficult time for children.

The week leading up to Mother’s Day is usually time spent at school creating a special card or clay object to take home to mom for her special day. For children that have no contact with their biological mom, this will be extremely difficult. It’s very important for teachers at school to be sensitive to these children during this time.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Make a little speech to the class about how there are different kinds of mothers. Including foster mothers or even fathers who are raising their children alone. There are adoptive mothers. There are grandparents or other relatives that are raising the children. There are homes with two mothers or two fathers.
2. Point out that anyone special who has cared for a child can be remembered on Mother’s Day. This will help all children to feel included during this special holiday.

As foster parents, there are some simple steps you can take to ease the emotional pain that a foster child may feel on Mother’s Day. Here are some suggestions:

1. Foster parents need to put aside their own feelings about how the child was treated by his or her mother. Research shows that foster children still psychologically carry with them the hope of returning to live with their parents despite what has happened. Loyalty is strong.
2. Ask the child or children to make a card for his/her biological mother. Of course it’s their decision to do so or not. If they make the card, offer the child to sleep with it under his or her pillow that night. This could be a way for them to feel close to their birth mothers even though they are not physically present.
3. If the child has a picture of his or her mother, let the child carry it with him/her on mother’s day (if they choose to). If the child does not have a picture, he or she could draw a picture of what the two would be doing together.
4. Do not push the child to do anything if they do not want too. Pushing will only create resentment.
5. If the child or children still have visitation with the mother, offer to have an extra visit on Mother’s Day if possible. Check with the caseworker and agency first.
6. If spending time with the biological mother is not possible, offer to have a visit with a sibling if there are siblings not placed together or other relative that they have contact with. As long as it’s not going to be too upsetting for them.
7. Spend some special time with the child or children. Let them know that they are loved and that they are special.
It's very important to make foster children feel loved, especially during Mother’s Day. On a day which can be extremely difficult, it is important to give these children a means of expressing appreciation for the person who is caring for them. It is very important to make these children feel included in special activities, regardless of their status.

For foster mothers, please remember that if you do harbor feelings of resentment towards your foster child's mother, she did one thing right. She created the wonderful child that you are now taking care of.

For the biological mothers, it’s not the fault of the foster mother that your child is in their care. Be thankful that they are there to care for your child while you are not able to.

Tech Notes:

Submitted by: Gene Detter

Ladies and Gentlemen, as you visit the training rooms, please remember to keep the pc’s turned on. If you find pc’s turned off, even if you do not plan on using them, please turn them on and leave them on. Technology Development needs the pc’s on in order to perform remote maintenance to ensure they are running as well as possible for you. In addition, as is stated on signs in all training rooms, please do not move the equipment on the carts. Moreover, please do not move the carts themselves. Technology Development visits the training rooms on occasion and is more frequently finding bindings clipped, equipment moved, and carts shifted to locations/positions that differ from their original setups. For the sake of the cables and hardware connections, the setups must remain in their original positions/locations.

We always welcome, and need, your feedback on technology in the training rooms. If you have any suggestions for changes in setups and/or questions/comments/concerns related to technology in the PACWRC training rooms, please feel free to contact Gene Detter at eld8@pitt.edu.

You might notice that some training room pc’s were upgraded to Windows 7. They are the same physical pc’s used in the training rooms; however, they have received internal hardware upgrades to allow the use of a newer operating system. Windows XP was great, but Microsoft noted, come the end of April, it will no longer officially support Windows XP; so, it’s time to move on. All machines will be upgraded to Windows 7 as Technology Development visits the training rooms. Pittston was the first to receive the upgrade (as well as public WiFi – related login and instructions signs were posted in the training rooms/conference room). The Center is purposefully not moving to Windows 8 at this time and has chosen to continue to use Office 2010, as Windows 8 and Office 2013 use interfaces that could be construed by many as confusing.

Finally, to all that helped and continue to help the PACWRC Technology Department by turning on pc’s and rebooting wireless routers/equipment, we thank you. We truly value everything you do to help us keep the training rooms running as well as possible and could not continue to service the machines remotely without your efforts.
“Ask the CWRC” is a new feature in the Trainer and Consultant Palette, which was suggested by one of our trainers, Launa Kowalcyk, as a forum to get your questions answered. If you have questions that you think would be beneficial to you and other trainers to have answered, please send your questions via email with the subject: “Ask the CWRC” to Amy Warnagiris at alw130@pitt.edu. Questions answered in the “Ask the CWRC” column will be published anonymously.

Dear CWRC Staff,

Recently I went into a training room at one of the satellite locations and the participants seemed so far away from me. I had plenty of room up front to move around but the participant tables seemed to be pushed together in the back of the room. Am I allowed to move the tables to make the room work for me and my students?

“Too Much Space”

Dear “Too Much Space”:

Training rooms are set up by the staff and maintained by a cleaning service. Your training space should support the principles of the adult learning theory. Therefore, if you have a small group, place the participant materials at the tables closer to the instructor and then encourage the participants to sit closer to the front of the room. Also, there are times when the cleaning service may have pushed the furniture away from the desired position. You may move the tables to make the training room work for your activities. However, please DO NOT move the instructor PC or projector.

Thanks for your question,

The CWRC Staff

Dear CWRC Staff,

It seems like none of the participants even look at the Resource Table in my training room. Do you have any suggestions how to make it interesting?

“Tired of Carrying Books”
Dear “Tired of Carrying Books,”

Resource displays can be a wonderful asset within a training room. Trainers can assemble books, manuals, items, display of pictures, or any combination. The trainer should gather current materials that specifically pertain to the topic being discussed. Resource displays need to be marketed to the participants as a tool for their learning. To do this, early within the workshop, the trainer should go to the Resource Table, point out the different resources, and comment on how the resources can be used. For instance, if the resource item has specific meaning to the staff working in the Independent Living Unit, hold the item up and indicate this. In addition, some trainers choose to place items from the resource table on the participants’ tables to encourage the participants to become familiar with materials. Trainers who do this also rotate the different resource table materials so that participants have the opportunity to check out a variety of materials.

Thanks for your question,

The CWRC Staff

---

Dear CWRC Staff,

Are training participants allowed to use the satellite office computers during breaks and their lunch time?

“Don’t Want to be Mean”

Dear “Don’t Want to be Mean,”

The CWRC policy is that the computers in the training rooms are for the instructors use only. Some of the training rooms have free Wi-Fi available. If a training room has Wi-Fi, there is a sign posted in the training room with details on how to access the Wi-Fi connection. Should you or any participant experience difficulty connecting to the wireless network and need assistance, you can contact the CWRC at 717-795-9048 and request to speak with the Technology Development Department.

Thanks for your question,

The CWRC Staff
When Did You Stop Learning? Building Transfer of Learning Into Agencies.


Introduction

Transfer of learning (TOL) studies have concluded that, at times, only 10 – 13% of skills or knowledge learned in training is actually applied in the workplace (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Broad and Newstrom, 1992; Rackham, 1979). Trainees that implement new skills after training can experience awkwardness when first trying out new skills, and then can become frustrated, which can lead them to abandon their efforts to implement new knowledge and skills. Instead, they return to old practices that feel more comfortable to them. In order to better understand how to strengthen TOL practices in Pennsylvania, the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and the Child Welfare Resource Center (CWRC) decided to more closely examine the implementation and impact of TOL activities. This included a research study, as well as a careful look at feedback from TOL participants. The research study examined training outcomes amongst public child welfare workers in Pennsylvania.

Background

The CWRC trains and certifies all of Pennsylvania’s county child welfare workers. In addition to providing training, CWRC staff also provide Pennsylvania’s counties with technical assistance on a variety of initiatives and county needs. As the expectations regarding the practices of public child welfare agencies have evolved, efforts and strategies to impact practice and effect change have continued to increase. The staff at CWRC observed that often the most common strategy to improve practice was to send staff to training and expect that this would create change. However, data gathered from a variety of initiatives, including Pennsylvania’s Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), did not reflect practice changes as a result of training efforts. It became apparent that efforts to promote TOL outside the classroom were necessary to impact child welfare practice and service delivery.

Pennsylvania’s 2008 CFSR results indicated that efforts were needed to increase the engagement of children, youth and families receiving services. This heightened awareness provided an opportunity for evaluators to examine strategies that may influence the transfer of learning into practice. The CWRC staff developed a series of TOL strategies that when combined with classroom training could increase a participant’s use of content in practice. The Evaluation Team hypothesized that trainees who received a TOL training package would be more likely to use new knowledge and skills on the job compared with trainees who received training as usual.
Study Methodology

The study took place from 2007 through 2012 and used a standard intervention and control design with intervention counties receiving the TOL intervention and control counties receiving only training. Participation by staff in the evaluation was voluntary; however, participation in the training and TOL strategies was not voluntary and required by the agencies as part of staff employment and professional development. From initiation to completion, participation was about 6 months (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Transfer of Learning Strategy

- One (2hr) TOL Introductory Session introducing TOL concept and expectations
- One (6hr) classroom-based training
- Two (2hr) TOL Support Caseworker Sessions focusing on challenges implementing training content
- Two (2hr) TOL Support Supervisor Sessions focusing on supervising & coaching on training content

The Evaluation Team decided to focus on studying the TOL strategy in connection with training on the engagement of clients\(^1\). Counties frequently requested this training due to increased focus on family engagement, as well as an emphasis in the state’s CFSR results and subsequent Program Improvement Plan (PIP). Based on the learning needs of a county, it was included in either the intervention or the control group. Counties that just wanted the training, participated as controls and counties that wanted further assistance, TOL, committed their participation in the TOL strategies outlined above. Those counties that participated as controls did have the opportunity to request the TOL strategies above after 6 months from the initial training. These counties could then be included as intervention counties.

\(^1\)This study was approved and monitored by The University of Pittsburgh’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Beginning 2010, both control & intervention participants received incentives due to a grant from the Dean of the School of Social Work.

Study Design

The study incorporated several measures and interventions employed at regular intervals. Both intervention and control participants completed the same measures at the same intervals (see Figure 2). Intervention participants participated in an initial training, TOL Support Sessions and a Booster Shot Training (see Figure 3). Control participants participated in an initial training and received no other formal interventions regarding how to transfer classroom skills into practice.
Figure 2: Study Measurements

**Agency Climate Survey**
- Asks all participants views on their agency’s perspective on training, its value and support for implementation of new techniques.

**Self Assessment**
- Asks all participants to rate their use of training material and content in their everyday practice.

**Supervisory Assessment**
- Asks supervisors to rate each of their supervisees on their use of training material and content in their everyday practice.

The *Agency Climate Survey* incorporated the *Learning Transfer System Inventory* (Holton & Bates, 1998). It measures factors in the agency climate that may influence training transfer including Peer Support, Supervisor Support, Supervisor Sanction, and Resistance/Openness to Change.

The *Self-Assessment and Supervisory Assessments* are project-developed measures focusing on skills specific to training content, but also included items adapted from Wehrmann, Shin, & Poertner (2002).

Findings

Training outcomes were compared over a two-month and six-month period between trainees who participated in a TOL training package and trainees who participated in training alone. A total of 259 of the caseworkers and supervisors participating in Strengths-Based Solution-Focused trainings enrolled in the study. Of these participants, 166 completed all of the data collection activities in the study.

Results suggest some positive impact of the TOL training packages. For example, for participating caseworkers in the TOL group, perceptions of peer support and supervisor support significantly improved between baseline and the six-month follow-up. Openness to change also moved in a positive direction (though was not statistically significant). There were no differences in perceptions of support or openness to change for participants in the control group.

Analyses also showed that participating caseworkers in the control group reported feeling significantly less knowledgeable about training content six months post-training. Although not statistically significant, participating caseworkers in the intervention group showed positive trends in items related to content knowledge, ability to use training content and opportunities to use training content six months after training. Taken together, these findings suggest that the added support and booster sessions were effective in helping participants retain and utilize the training content, and without them, participants actually felt less knowledgeable about content than they did prior to the training.
Figure 3: TOL Timeline and Measurement Usage for Intervention Participants

- Introductory Session
  - 2 weeks PRIOR to training.
  - All participants complete Informed Consent & Self Assessment.

- Training
  - Participants complete Agency Environment Survey prior to training.
  - At the conclusion, participants complete the Self Assessment.

- Support Session
  - 30 days post training; separate sessions for Caseworkers & Supervisors.
  - Supervisors complete Supervisory Assessments.
  - Caseworkers & Supervisors complete Self Assessments.

- Booster Shot
  - 50 days post training.
  - No measures are completed at the Booster Shot Training.

- Support Session
  - 120 days post-training; separate sessions for Caseworkers & Supervisors.
  - Supervisors complete Supervisory Assessments.
  - Caseworkers & Supervisors complete Self Assessments & Agency Environment Survey.

- Closing Session
  - 150 days post-training
  - Debriefing on strengths and challenges

There were no significant differences between supervisor ratings of caseworkers in the intervention or control groups. However, due to confidentiality issues, it was not possible to link supervisor ratings with specific caseworkers. Additionally, supervisors rated all of their caseworkers, even if caseworkers declined participation in the project (supervisors were not told which of their caseworkers had signed consent forms). Thus, we could only look at supervisor ratings of their caseworkers as a group. Although ratings were slightly more positive for the intervention group than the control group, there were no statistically significant differences.

As another line of sight on the use and effectiveness of TOL packages, we examined the feedback collected as part of the After Action Reviews (AARs) after counties had participated in a TOL package. These went beyond the scope of the research study and included topics such as Strength-Based Solution-Focused Supervision, Achieving Permanency through Kinship Foster Care, Risk Assessment and Safety Assessment. The number and sequencing of TOL sessions and Booster Shots varied from county to county and training to training.
Overall, participants appreciated some of the structural differences between the TOL approach and trainings as usual. One particular benefit of the TOL approach was that everyone was trained together. One participant said that the “TOL supports help supervisors and caseworkers stay on task; they hold supervisors accountable to caseworkers’ growth.” Other participants echoed this sentiment: “the package showed commitment from the entire agency and provided a common language to communicate”, “trainers and specialists incorporated the same language – kept all staff connected”, “hearing from everyone other options/opinions about how it might work for you – different units within the TOL Support Sessions”, and “Everyone thinks and applies a lot more with a TOL package having the same training/process together”. In the same vein, participants appreciated the fact that the trainings all occurred in-house and that they did not have to travel.

Another benefit was the addition (and timing) of Support Sessions and Booster Shot trainings. As one participant stated, “The three month delay from the last TOL session and the closing session was a good thing; it gave everyone time to try the skills and then come back and review them.” Other participants shared the following: “Got more out of the TOL sessions than the trainings. Sessions made it practical to our work and we learned from one another”, “Booster shot training reinforced learning”, “TOL review of skills and concepts was helpful and reinforcing”, and “reminder meetings helped the new information from going down the drain”.

Participants also enjoyed the training tools that were used along the way. For example, a few participants said that they liked the handouts that were shared and that they referred to them after the training session. Others said that they valued the action plans, stating that they allowed for “the gradual building of skills”. The group activities and other learning tools were also appreciated by participants (e.g., “Jeopardy and card games were fun and engaging and helped to refresh the material.”)

However, there were some participants who disliked aspects of the TOL structure. Some participants stated that the addition and timing of the Support Sessions and Booster Shot trainings were “redundant” or that “the training process took too long.” As such, a few worried that the time they had to invest in the TOL sessions would take away from time they could devote to other trainings. A few also stated that the sessions were scheduled too closely together and that they would have liked more time in between sessions to practice. Other suggestions that participants gave were around some of the training activities. One participant wanted to “role play with our own cases”; another asked for “more realistic examples.”

All in all, however, feedback on the TOL process was predominantly positive. Although sometimes it was difficult to get the timing of sessions just right (which is understandable when trying to coordinate trainings with an entire agency), participants at all levels appreciated the opportunity to learn, discuss, and practice skills in this manner. They felt that the structure allowed for consistent training across job categories and they valued the reinforcement of the knowledge and skills that the on-going trainings provided.
Implications for Practice

Organizations looking to improve their service delivery should consider integrating efforts and strategies beyond classroom-based training in order to realize significant changes to direct practice. Study results suggest that trainees need more than a classroom-based training to develop skills and then implement them in their practice. These strategies cannot be casually implemented but need to be structured, deliberate sets of activities or resources intended to help participants make the connections from theoretical concept and associated skill to integrating that concept into practice. A planned series of steps or activities that continue outside of a learning event are necessary for organizations to strengthen the link from training to practice. The planned series of activities help to support participants’ integration of the knowledge they have just learned in the training room into practice. Without the activities or supports in place, participants often return back to their old way of doing tasks or are have a harder time fitting the new tasks into their daily practice. The TOL activities also provide a way to assist the supervisor in learning the best way to support their staff in the use of the new knowledge and skills.

References


Citation for this report:

For questions about the study or for further information, please contact Shauna Reinhart, Research Coordinator, at shr30@pitt.edu.

In partnership with families, communities, public and private agencies, we prepare and support exceptional child welfare professionals and systems through education, research and a commitment to best practice.”