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## Parent-Child Relationship in Foster Care

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### Abstract

Nurturing foster care greatly disrupts a child's need for stable, nurturing family bonds, impacting their emotional well-being and development. This often leads to trauma and complex attachment issues, as the bond with biological parents is altered. While foster care aims to protect, it complicates connections, presenting challenges for foster parents in managing emotional difficulties related to separation. Maintaining biological ties is critical for a child's identity and requires dedicated efforts from all involved. Effective systems prioritize trauma-informed care, supporting beneficial family contacts and fostering skills to enhance the potential for reunification and positive outcomes for children.

**Keywords-** Relationship, Consideration, Responsibility, Reunification.

### Introduction-

When a child enters the foster care system, their need for stable and nurturing family bonds is greatly disturbed. The relationship between a child and their parents is crucial for their early development and emotional well-being. This relationship often changes drastically, leading to lasting trauma and complex issues with attachment. Although foster care aims to protect children by providing temporary care, it disrupts the connection between them and their biological parents. To fully understand this situation, it is important to recognize the pain of separation that these children experience. Foster parents face unique challenges in dealing with these complex attachment issues. They must navigate the emotional difficulties that arise from a child being away from their biological family. Additionally, the foster care system tries to maintain or rebuild these essential family connections in a therapeutic way. This requires careful consideration and effort from all parties involved. The overall goal is to ensure that children can feel secure and supported, even amid the changes that come with being in foster care.

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## **The Trauma of Separation and Ambivalent Attachment**

Entering foster care is a major event that negatively impacts a child's development and relationships. When a child is taken from their home, it is usually sudden and not their choice. This removal breaks their bond with their primary caregiver, causing feelings of loss and betrayal, even if the caregiver was neglectful or abusive. Instead of feeling safe, the child feels confused about where to find comfort, contributing to difficulties in forming healthy attachments. This confusing experience can lead to attachment disorders, as the child tries to understand their feelings of pain alongside their need for safety. Overall, the experience of being placed in foster care is traumatic and complicates the child's ability to connect with others.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Child's Perspective: Loyalty Binds and Grief**

Children in foster care often have strong feelings for their biological parents, which can become even more idealized during times of separation, despite any risks involved. They frequently face loyalty binds, meaning they feel torn between their love for their foster caregivers and their sense of responsibility for their biological parents' problems or inability to regain custody. This inner conflict can lead to behavioral instability, issues with trusting new adults, and regressive behaviors. Grief for these children is complex and not a simple process. They mourn not only the loss of their actual relationship with their parents but also the idealized version of that relationship, as well as the loss of a normal family life. How a child deals with this grief can depend on their age and developmental stage. Younger children, for example, might show disorganized attachment patterns, which make it hard for them to connect securely with either their biological or foster caregivers.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Biological Parent's Experience: Loss of Role and Identity**

For a biological parent, separation from their child is a devastating loss of identity. Parenting is a core part of who they are, and when the state intervenes, it removes their main role as a parent. This loss leads to strong feelings of shame, anger, and helplessness. If the parent has issues like substance abuse or mental illness, the removal can make these problems worse, making it harder for them to participate in reunification services.<sup>3</sup>

In foster care, the relationship between the parent and child becomes governed by strict rules and court orders instead of positive, natural interactions. The visits that occur, often supervised, do not provide the same feeling of closeness as real parenting moments. This lack of genuine connection puts more pressure on the parent, creating anxiety about their performance during visits. Overall, the separation affects both the parent's well-being and the bond with their child, complicating efforts to reunite.

## **The Role of Foster Parents in Bridging or Widening the Gap**

Foster parents take on a significant responsibility by caring for a child and managing their relationship with the child's absent biological parents. Their attitudes and actions are very important as they affect how the child connects with their past while adjusting to their current life. This balance is crucial for the child's emotional well-being and development.

**Facilitating Contact and Co-Parenting** - Foster parents should serve as temporary support for children, helping them maintain a connection to their biological families as long as

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safety is guaranteed. This requires foster parents to approach the biological family's situation with cultural humility and without judgment. Effective foster care often includes therapeutic visitations, allowing foster parents to enable contact in a way that is both structured and emotionally supportive for the child. If foster parents criticize or oppose the biological parents, they may unintentionally make the child feel disloyal and create insecurities about attachment. A successful foster placement usually means that the foster parent acts as a 'good ally' instead of trying to replace the biological family, recognizing and respecting the child's history. By doing this, foster parents can help foster a more stable emotional environment for the child while supporting their need for connection with their biological family.<sup>4</sup>

**Navigating Ambiguous Permanency** - The foster care system is filled with uncertainty about whether children will reunite with their biological parents or if their parental rights will be terminated. This situation puts a lot of pressure on foster parents, who must emotionally connect with the child while also preparing for the chance of separation. This emotional balance can lead to mixed feelings, especially when foster parents grow attached but must still help the biological parents. When foster parents see that biological parents are not improving, their growing bond with the child might drive them to support keeping the child instead of favoring reunification. This creates a conflict with the system's goal, which aims for the child to return home if possible. Overall, the unclear timeline in foster care creates significant emotional challenges for foster parents as they navigate their roles and responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

## **Therapeutic Interventions and Maintaining Connection**

The acknowledgment of the biological bond's importance has resulted in a greater use of therapeutic models aimed at fixing and maintaining relationships in foster care. This trend highlights the need for relationship support within this system.

**Therapeutic Visitation and Parent Coaching** - Modern best practices focus on structured, competency-based visitation instead of just unsupervised time. Therapeutic visitation includes trained professionals who watch and coach biological parents on how to care for their children, manage emotions, and set boundaries. Programs like Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), adapted for foster care, teach parents positive reinforcement methods that help rebuild trust. The goal is to improve the quality of interactions between parents and children, rather than just ensuring parents follow court orders. This approach emphasizes the importance of effective parenting skills and creating a nurturing environment for children.<sup>6</sup>

**Addressing Trauma in the Triad** - The trauma experienced affects the child, biological parent, and foster parent. Effective interventions must focus on trauma. For the child, it's important to know that disruptive behaviors often come from attachment issues due to separation, not bad intent. Biological parents need specialized treatment to deal with the root causes of their situation. Additionally, foster parents must receive special training to understand how instability from the biological parent can affect the child's behavior. They also need to learn how to help the child process difficult feelings about their birth family while ensuring the child feels secure in their current living situation.<sup>7</sup>

**Reunification and Post-Reunification Support**

The main goal for children entering foster care is to reunite safely and quickly with their families. How well this happens depends on the strength and quality of the relationship between the parent and child. This relationship should be kept strong or improved during their time apart. Maintaining or restoring this bond can significantly influence the success of reunification.

**Indicators of Successful Reunification** - Successful reunification is more than just closing a case; it requires creating a safe and stable environment for the parent-child relationship to grow without the state's immediate involvement. Research shows that families who have strong and regular parent-child interactions during foster care, often helped by supportive visitations, tend to have better long-term stability after reunification. When these relationships are well-supported, the move back home is easier because the child has already practiced their attachment in a structured way. Establishing a low-risk environment helps both parents and children reconnect without the fear of immediate state interference. High-quality interactions during the foster care period are key to ensuring that the family can stay together successfully after reunification. It is crucial that each step in the process is handled with care to support ongoing relationships and to promote stability for the children involved. This approach reduces the chance of future issues, enhancing the overall success of the reunification.<sup>8</sup>

**The Long Shadow of Disruption** - When families are reunited after a child has been removed, lack of preparation or severe damage to their bond can increase the chances that the child will return to the system. Even if a reunification is deemed successful, it often still carries the effects of state intervention. Children may feel anxious about their stability, while biological parents might deal with feelings of stigma and self-doubt. Support after reunification is important. Ongoing family therapy and community support can help strengthen the bond between family members and prevent a return to the situations that led to removal.

This support acknowledges that rebuilding trust is an ongoing process and not just a one-time event that signals the end of a case. Without proper follow-up, the risks remain high for both the children and the parents involved. The emphasis should be on continuous support to address lingering issues and to build a healthier family dynamic post-reunification. Overall, the process of reuniting families is complex, and it requires careful planning and sustained efforts to ensure that the relationships can truly heal and thrive.<sup>9</sup>

**Conclusion**

The parent-child relationship in foster care is complex and often painful, marked by loss and legal challenges. This relationship is disrupted and involves many outsiders, including the state, which closely monitors it. A key challenge is to provide immediate safety and stability for children with foster families while also allowing them to maintain ties with their birth families. Successful systems recognize the biological connection as an essential part of the child's identity and overall well-being rather than an obstacle to placement. Effective policies

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should support everyone involved, focusing on trauma-informed care. It is important that family contacts are beneficial, that foster parents can navigate complicated feelings about loyalties, and that efforts to reunite families are based on rebuilding parental skills, not just following rules. Ultimately, the strength of the parent-child bond, even amidst the pressures of the child welfare system, is the best indicator of a child's ability to thrive and build healthy relationships in the future.

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