

## Nurturing Identity in Children Who Move

By Lark Eshleman, PhD

“What’s your favorite food?” “Tell me about the music you like – I don’t understand it, but I want to. What does it say to you?” “Did you used to go to church before you came to our family? What was that like? Who took you?” “Gosh, you have a blue shirt on ... is that your favorite color? It’s mine too!”

What a difficult job for children or teens, to find their place in a new family without giving up their own selves. They may not understand your mealtime routines, your bedtime expectations, or your commitment to Sunday family gatherings, and yet they’re expected to join in, participate, and follow along as if they are with a family of their own. It’s a big job for children who have already experienced trauma and loss. And yet foster families often believe that it is important for children to CHANGE in order to fit in. We even judge a child’s “cooperation” (or lack of) as a measure of his or her mental health or balance.

But what if, for example, a foster child has a basic belief – (and we are all entitled to our own beliefs, right?) – that Sunday is for worship? And yet this new foster family is expecting him to not go to church, but instead to spend Sunday at the weekly family gathering at grandparents’ home? Hhhmmm.... Maybe that’s not a good way to nurture a young person’s sense of personal identity and support his individual sense of who he is?

Or what if a new foster child comes to feel “invisible” because she hears your family retell the great stories about “Grandpa Jim” or “Cousin Selma” but no one asks about HER great stories or seems interested in the people in HER past.

The vast majority of foster children will not become “your” child – a member of your family forever. Long after they are gone from your home they will still have themselves to live with, the “real” person inside.

And yet, this young, frightened, or at the very least confused child or teen DOES have a “real” person in there, one that has a favorite color, a much-loved food, a memory about a much-adored Grandma who used to read bedtime stories or Grandpa who used to tell silly jokes. I don’t know about you, but for me, sharing memories about the treasures from my past keeps those beautiful people alive for me, and makes me feel so good about myself – those people in my past loved me, and through their love for me, they helped shape who I am and how good I feel about myself.

Recently I had dinner with a friend, Mary Lou Edgar, who, with her terrific husband, Dan, has birthed and fostered and adopted many very fortunate children. She and her husband have just celebrated the first anniversary of A Better Chance for Our Children in Delaware, a child placement agency that in itself promotes inner strength for its children and families. I asked Mary Lou what she did that made such a huge positive impact on the children she has parented in her own family. The picture she quickly painted was a picture in which she asked questions. She asked what they liked. She asked what they did and who they were. She listened to their thoughts about themselves and their lives before they came to

her family. She made accommodations for each child as a person – spiritually, emotionally, and as a growing, changing child or teen. How better to nurture the emerging person within?

Here are a few examples of what you might do to create a similar type of nurturing home for your foster child.

- ❖ Ask a caseworker BEFORE PLACEMENT to find out this child's favorite food and favorite color. Then serve that food as an "introduction meal" on arrival, and have a blanket or other important personal item in that favorite color in the child's room.
- ❖ Leave time to just sit and quietly talk with your new foster child, perhaps not on the first few days when everything is new and perhaps frightening, but after a few days when you make quiet, alone time. You might, for example, play a little game of "My favorite outside thing to do is...." And then ask about her "favorite outside thing to do." If she says, "I don't know," you might suggest a few things that most children her age like to do, and ask her to rate each on a scale from 1 – 10. Don't "correct" or even necessarily comment on the answer – it's just the beginning of developing a relationship. Accepting whatever she says is a critical part of the beginning of trust. And don't make this too long ... maybe just talk for 10 minutes about "favorites" or "things I REALLY don't like" or "favorite teacher" – anything simple is a good way to start.
- ❖ When your child shows that he likes a certain TV show, and it's one you also like, tell him, "Wow, this is another way we're alike. That's great!" Don't make a big deal about it, just acknowledge it and let it go. But soon, you'll find that there are many things that you honestly have in common, which is another great way to encourage trust and the growth of your relationship.

Remember, these children are not with their birth families, and they may feel that they don't really belong anywhere. Being "twins" with you about the many things you have in common is a great way to help him feel grounded in your family and still keep his personal identity.

Every time you show that you are truly interested in the child within – the likes, and loves, and treasured memories – you nurture that child in a way that keeps the inner light alive and feeds the mind and spirit of each child in your care. This is a true gift, and one that all children deserve. And this is a gift that they can take with them wherever they go, in foster care and well beyond.

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