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**Four Principles of Proactive Foster Care**  
(2000)

1. *Adult's accountability to the child.* Foster care programs must never lose sight of the fact that their primary client is the child, and must be proactive in effecting either a timely return of the child to the birth parents, or a timely transition to a permanent alternative.

The adults involved -birth and foster parents, workers, family and child advocates, judges- should concentrate their efforts on reducing the time spent by the child in foster care, as well as the stress experienced by the child while he or she is in foster care. This contrasts with current policies that allow adults to tamper with the child's lifetime while they engage in the pursuit of their own conflictive agendas, such as the struggle over drug use versus abstinence.<sup>1</sup>

2. *Connectedness.* Continuous contact and dialogue among the parties involved in the life of a child in foster care is crucial to minimize the disruption of the child's experience, to insure the success of reunification, or to ease the termination of parental rights when needed.

Accountability to the child requires an ongoing and fluid dialogue among the relevant parties involved: the children themselves, the birth and foster parents, the extended family, the schools, etc. This contrasts with the fragmentation of the child's world that is currently promoted by keeping most of these people apart from each other, often for reasons that have little to do with the interests of the child: "Foster and birth parents should not meet because they can hurt each other's feelings"; "Women who are undergoing drug rehabilitation should not have contact with their children and families, so that they can focus on their recovery", or "Belligerent parents (i.e., parents who get angry at the system) will have their visitation rights curtailed"... Workers are particularly responsible for *supporting* (rather than *preventing*) dialogue between the birth and foster parents.<sup>2</sup>

3. *Acknowledgement and validation of differences.* Connectedness does not necessarily mean agreement. The complex families/agencies system includes built-in conflicts of interests and an inevitable pull towards fragmentary, adversarial, "check-and-balances" dynamics. Birth parents, foster parents, and multiple workers are bound to pursue different and most probably diverging agendas, and to distrust and dislike each other. This is understandable and should not be used as a rationale to curtail contact.

In the world of foster care, *encouraging* connections is more important than *correcting* them; families need to be allowed to happen before they can be

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<sup>1</sup> Colapinto, J., "Hostage Children". AFTA Newsletter, Summer 1998, p.57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

dissected and rearranged. A mother scolding her son over homework may be not as good a relationship as a mother supporting him, but is better than the mother not knowing what is going on with her son's schooling. A birth and a foster parent who argue over what is best for the child are more helpful to the child than their counterparts who never talk to each other.<sup>3</sup>

4. *Parental responsibility.* Birth parents need to participate as *co-responsible parents* (not just as *dysfunctional clients* of rehabilitation services).

"Connectedness" does not mean just "frequent visitation": parents should be allowed (and required) to relate to their children *as parents*. Placing a child in foster care should not be equated with a total cessation of parenting. While some parenting functions (such as providing shelter and nutrition) obviously require physical cohabitation, there are many others (such as meeting the child's teachers, attending medical appointments, discussing life issues with the child) that can be exercised even when parent and child are not living under the same roof... The exercise of parental responsibility *during the time that the child is in foster care* serves multiple purposes: it protects the child's experience of continuity; it gives the parent the opportunity to maintain and increase her competence; and it provides a yardstick against which to measure the parent's competence and motivation. All of this increases the chances that the decision to either reunite a child with the parents or terminate the parents' rights will be reached sooner, rather than later.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.