

Why is Family Time difficult in fostering? Family time, negative cognitions and mantras



Family time between looked after children / young people and their family of origin / the people whose care we have removed them from can be and often is a source of significant distress for all involved. Frequently, there are discrepancies between what family time is supposed to achieve (better sense of identity for the child, better consistency in care and messages given to the young person, a better future for all involved, better placement stability that is not hindered by the child worrying about their parents / siblings) and what carers observe in children before, during and after family time. For carers, it can be incredibly hard to stay calm, to keep perspective and to persevere supporting meetings that appear to undo one's therapeutic work, without feeling affected. Children, as well, frequently fall victim of irrational negative thoughts around family time and they need support in challenging these thoughts.

Although the thoughts carers might explicitly have in their minds when frustrated are about other people's responsibility and faults (or the objective "unfairness of it all"), it is important to focus on those times when incongruencies and challenging situations feel personal.

In this handout, we are providing you:

- examples of dilemmas around family time
- examples of negative cognitions carers and children might encounter when it comes to family time
- examples of possible "evidence" that might reinforce carers' and children's irrational negative beliefs while in crisis
- suggestions on how to counteract them with mantras and more cool-headed evidence

We have left some space for you to fill in with the negative cognitions, mantras and evidence that most apply to your situation.

We suggest you read this handout in conjunction with this video <https://youtu.be/RKn88LbOmqU> and once you have revised our handout on INTERNAL MYTHS AND HELPFUL MANTRAS (see <https://www.essexadoptionandfostering.co.uk/fostering/are-you-a-foster-carer/psychologists-corner/keeping-perspective/>)

Remember that one "mantra for all seasons" is **THIS IS NOT PERSONAL!** Try and apply it to all of the examples below and to your own... and see how it works really well.

When looking for more "objective" evidence of one's worth, a good trick is also to ask people we trust and who know us well, of course.

CARERS

supporting a young person's relationships with family and celebrating their identity

VS

seeing children being re-traumatised by seeing parents/siblings and observing the effects this has on their sense of safety, development of security, ability to learn, sense of self

Negative Cognitions	Unhelpful Supporting Evidence	Positive Cognition	Helpful Supporting Evidence
I am not lovable	The child still prefers their birth family, despite the trauma they have caused	I am lovable This is not personal	The child cannot actually choose whom to feel attached to, because things are completely out of their control. The child's trauma and any of its manifestations are literally nothing to do with me or my worth. <i>The child's behaviour might actually suggest, even in a small way, that they are settling into placement and enjoying being part of my family and under my care.</i>
I am useless / powerless	I cannot stop this child from being re-traumatised every time they have family time and I cannot protect them from pain, sadness, anger, shame and confusion	I am doing everything that is within my power	Although I cannot change the fact that the child needs to have family time, or how often that takes place, I am still investing my energies into making their life as "healing" and secure as I can in between meetings with their family; I'm showing them a different way of living, and of relating to others and to themselves.
I am selfish	... because I wish this young person understood and celebrated explicitly the safety and love I am giving them, instead of still having loyalties towards those who hurt them	I am caring and considerate and brave	I am letting myself connect to this young person despite all of the difficulties linked to their trauma, including the implications of family time. I am doing my best to put their feelings and needs first even if it is hard not to take things personally. I am allowing myself to feel the pain and vulnerability

			linked to this situation, even if it is so hard!
I am ineffective	Everything I do, all the efforts I am making can and do get wiped away by the time the child spends with people who abused them	I am doing the best I can	Even if it feels like all I do is to no avail, this is simply not true. Admittedly, progress can be small and slow, but no connection is going unnoticed and all interaction have an effect.

FOR CARERS, WORKING WITH PROFESSIONALS

Being told that the plan is for stability and safety for the child

VS

Contact arrangements that seem to go against that and do not seem to be in the child's best interest

Negative Cognitions	Unhelpful Supporting Evidence	Positive Cognition	Helpful Supporting Evidence
I am unsafe / I am not keeping my family and/or my foster child safe	Look at how distressed we all are! Every time the foster child comes home from family time, we are all tense, worried about the "aftermath" and, basically, in survival mode. Logically, if things go on like this, we will all break down and this placement will collapse.	I am safe and I am providing others with safety	Though setbacks might be frequent and painful, I am showing this child that they always have consistent, caring, safe adults to fall back onto. Things might take a while to look like they are improving, but this child's brain is taking it all in. <i>The child might seem to settle quicker or more or easier.</i>
I am a horrible person OR I cannot be trusted	My role in this young person's life is to make sure they feel safe and secure... and here I am, taking them to be re-traumatised.	I am a caring, trustworthy person	I am keeping perspective and doing what I need to do in the wider scheme of things, even if it is painful for all involved right now. In being involved in family time, I have many opportunities to be there for the young person when they are anxious, confused, angry, ambivalent or sad about their meeting their family: I am there for them consistently.

Being told that they are part of the ‘team around the placement’ and they are a respected professional

VS

Not feeling listened to when they advocate for children or describe children’s experiences

Negative Cognitions	Unhelpful Supporting Evidence	Positive Cognition	Helpful Supporting Evidence
I am not worth listening to / I am inconsequential / I am worthless	Everybody else’s opinion, priorities and plans seem to matter more than mine. My opinion can be ignored and there is nothing I can do about it!	I am worth listening to / My opinion counts / I am worthy of consideration	When I really listen to other professionals’ positions, I can notice that they, too, are restricted in what decisions, changes or plans they can make. Sometimes a temporary non-ideal situation can lead to gathering precious evidence that plans need to change; in those cases, my input / feedback is actually essential. <i>I might have actual examples of people taking me seriously and paying attention to my opinions and suggestions.</i>
I am powerless	No matter how hard I try to advocate for this child, there are people and systems that can just override the fact that I know this child best	I have power	Even if the evidence I provide now does not lead to immediate changes, my views and observations are on record and I have the power to make them count. The things that are directly in my control – e.g. what goes on in the placement – I am assertively working on. I can make sure I am clear and explicit in my opinions and requests for support: that is definitely in my power.
I should do more / I am responsible for this mess	If I were a better advocate, the system would listen to me and the plan would certainly change	I am doing my best / I am doing my part to help	Thinking I have single-handedly the power to change things is irrational. I can only expect myself to play my role as well as I can.

I cannot trust anyone	Look at all these colleagues that are supposed to support my child and me: they say they want to help, but their decisions make our lives even more of a nightmare!	I can choose to trust others	I don't have to trust everyone, but I can choose to notice those colleagues who are showing signs of wanting to help, support and make things better for everyone involved in this placement. <i>I might have actual examples of people being supportive.</i>

FOR CHILDREN/ YOUNG PEOPLE:

Wanting to see/spend time with parents/siblings, need to be reassured they are kept in mind and still belong

VS

Experiencing anxiety, traumatic memories, dysregulation

Negative Cognitions	Unhelpful Supporting Evidence	Positive Cognition	Helpful Supporting Evidence
I am a bad person	<p>If not even my parents could love me enough to keep me safe / prioritise me, it must be that I am too bad to care about</p> <p>My parents let me go / are not actively making sure I go back into their care: they must have had enough of me</p> <p>I must have deserved all the abuse I received: because my parents know best</p> <p>No one wants to really "claim" me</p>	I am a good person	<p>I was/am just a child / young person and I am in no way responsible for my parents' actions, difficulties, attitudes or priorities. Their behaviour bears no link to my worth, because, as painful as it is, I do not actually have the power to change adults' choices.</p> <p>There are other people who love me and care for me and like me: I can't be that bad!</p>
I am not safe	<p>No sooner do I feel like I am safe, I am sent to see the very people who hurt me. Safety is only a temporary illusion.</p>	I am safe	<p>Although I still have to bear the discomfort of being with people who hurt me or with people who remind me of difficult times, I am now in the care of adults who look after me and do their best to keep me safe.</p> <p>Being unsafe is now the exception to the rule and, even then, those adults cannot hurt me the way they used to.</p>
This is all my fault	<p>I must have deserved all the abuse I received because my parents know best</p> <p>Look, even my carers or school are struggling with me, even now I don't live with my parents: I'm the common denominator to all of the stressful situations across my life.</p>	I am not responsible for adults' actions or for my past	<p>I was/am just a child / young person and I am in no way responsible for my parents' actions, difficulties, attitudes or priorities.</p> <p>Behaviours others still find hard to manage or even understand are as a result of what I have learnt, of the way I had to survive.</p>

Building positive relationships with carers, forming secure attachments with carers

VS

Feeling that they are disloyal to family or feeling that if parents did not love them no one ever really can

Negative Cognitions	Unhelpful Supporting Evidence	Positive Cognition	Helpful Supporting Evidence
I am unlovable	<p>Not even my parents could love me enough to keep me safe and/or make positive changes to get me back</p> <p>I do not belong to any family completely: no one is able or willing to completely “claim” me</p> <p>People need to get paid to want to look after me</p>	I am lovable	<p><i>If I look around, I have examples of people liking me, enjoying my company and praising my efforts.</i></p> <p>What happened to me has no link to my worth or right to be loved and unconditionally accepted: I have done nothing wrong to deserve not being loved!</p>
I cannot trust anyone	<p>Every time I have trusted someone I got hurt.</p> <p>Even the people who care for me right now take me to be retraumatized during family time (a child wouldn't put it like this, of course)</p>	I can trust others	<p><i>I have examples of being able to trust some people sometimes.</i></p> <p>It will take time and it would be stupid to relinquish all of my defences for no reason, but I have the choice to observe others and see if they act any different to those who taught me not to trust others.</p> <p>Although my carers do not stop me from having family time, they are supportive and accepting of my feelings and thoughts and they make sure I feel safe the rest of the time.</p>
I am rubbish / disloyal	<p>I'm supposed to love my parents and be happy to see them; instead I hate it.</p> <p>I'm supposed to be grateful to my carers, and instead I miss my family.</p> <p>I'm supposed to make a choice between my birth family and my foster family; instead I want to belong to them both</p>	I am good / I can connect to people who care for me	<p>I do not actually have to make a choice (<i>and no one is asking me to</i>): like everybody else, I am made of all the families I am part of / the important people in my life.</p> <p>My circumstances are unusual, but I can learn to get the best out of all of my experiences and the people I come across.</p>

I am powerless	Whether I enjoy family time or not, I still have to go, no matter how much I express my discomfort through words or behaviours	I have power	Although I cannot change my circumstances immediately, there are things I can do to express my wishes and feelings.

A taster of what's to come...

PACE

Acceptance - Accepting that the child's family will most likely always be part of their life. Accepting and trying to understand the child's mixed emotions about their family and help the child to make sense of these emotions.

Learning to de-escalate your own anxiety and other emotions around the child's family/contact, through accepting that you are bound to have mixed and somewhat negative feelings towards these challenging circumstances.

Curiosity – It can be helpful to try to learn about and understand the parents' history – this most likely is also one of developmental trauma.

Also making sense of how the child tells their own story of their family and their place in it.

Empathy – giving the child a message that their feelings about family and carers are recognised and accepted.

Playfulness – This is one to “turn on and turn up” when family time is not at the forefront of the child's mind, when they are more open to being focussed on the hopeful, joyful, serene aspects of their current situation. Make sure you make those moments as carefree as possible, to enhance recovery from potentially retraumatising experiences, to challenge the young person's negative cognitions, to give them emotional respite from confusion, sadness and anxiety.

Dr Barbara Canepa, Consultant Clinical Psychologist & Andreea Carver, Therapeutic Fostering Team Senior Practitioner