

## Selection of the Youth

The youth panel consists of 3-4 teens. Identify teens who you believe will not fear speaking in front of a group and will be able to present a well rounded view of foster care. Never ask a teen to present alone. The support of their peers is essential. Diversify the panel: males/females, racial/ethnic identity, age, living situation, experiences.

In terms of confidentiality, the youth who present must have had their parental rights terminated. In addition, youth should never be forced to participate but be volunteers. Emancipated or adopted youth may also be panel members. Pay the youth with cash, gift certificates or gifts. The amount should be in the range of \$15-25 per session.

## Preparation of the Youth

Meet with the panel members prior to the beginning of the session. Some agencies provide a snack to the youth such as pizza, subs, wings so the youth can become acquainted with each other. Provide the youth with a list of potential questions. Review the audience's guidelines with them.

1. Audience must keep the panel members' identity and story confidential.
2. Any panel member can "pass" on any question they feel uncomfortable or unprepared to answer.
3. The audience is not permitted to give advice, diagnose or criticize the youth. This is their story and their feelings are real.
4. The trainer is there to protect the youth and will intervene as necessary.

Present the panel guidelines to the youth. They are:

1. No profanity!
2. No "name dropping". This means that if the youth are upset or angry at a social worker or foster parent, they may not reveal their name. They may, however, relate the example to the audience.
3. If the youth wish to compliment a social worker or foster parent, they may use the person's name.

Ask if there are any questions or concerns. Thank the youth for their important contribution. Some youth may wish to observe a panel presentation before making the commitment to participate. This is a great way to orient them to the process.

### The Panel Presentation

**Trainer Instructions:** Guide the panel members through their experience using the following suggested questions. The trainer should assist the panel members and field all questions. Trainer should “go with the flow”- piggyback on issues the youth bring up rather than stick with the order of the list of questions.

**NOTE:** The trainer may need to restate or reformulate some questions from the audience, as they may be poorly articulated and confusing to the youth.

*\*Begin by asking the first several questions and then allowing the participants to ask questions. Trainer should make sure the questions from the audience are appropriate and interject other questions as appropriate. The trainer should ask the "last question" to the panel.*

### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS:

- Why/How did you come into foster care?
- How long have you lived away from your family?
- How many homes have you lived in?
- Describe your first day in your new home.
- What makes you feel comfortable in a new home?
- What do you like MOST about foster care?
- What do you like LEAST about foster care?
- Have you ever been treated differently than the birth children? • How did it feel?
- What are important traits for a foster/adoptive parent?
- Do you have contact with your family, including siblings?
- Why is this important? How can foster parents help?
- How would you feel living with a family or another race? Culture?
- Why should people consider fostering or adopting teens?
- What are your plans for the future?

### **Last Question:**

- **Give these potential foster/adoptive parents best piece of advice.**

### **After the Panel Presentation**

The panel can excuse themselves while staff briefly process the presentation, give additional information about fostering and adopting teens, provide info on the Independent Living Program. If the panel members remain in the room and mingle with the audience, monitor the conversations. It is not uncommon for the audience to become very inspired and make promises to the youth that they cannot meet.

## Use of Birth Parent in Pre-Service Training

The goal of the Birth Parent Presentation is for the participants to develop empathy and insight in regards to the birth parent. Participants who have been exposed to the reasons for placement and the impact of separation are likely to identify with the child and have negative feelings about the birth family. The trainer must first elicit these feelings and then carefully challenge the participants' values through the use of a birth parent guest speaker.

## Common Perceptions of the Birth Parent

It is not uncommon for the general public to possess a negative view of the typical birth parent whose children have been placed in foster care due to abuse, neglect, abandonment, or sexual victimization. Accounts reported by the media frequently depict the traumatic events that have affected children's lives. This generates sympathy for the child and contempt for the birth parent.

## Preparation/Selection of the Birth Parent Speaker

The birth parent speaker should be an individual who has been involved with the child welfare system, had children removed, reunited and the **case is now closed**. Birth Parent Speakers can be recruited through casework staff, 12 step programs, parenting classes, foster parents, etc.

The birth parent speaker should be prepared using the following steps:

1. Meet with the prospective speaker in person.
2. Describe the training session and how the birth parent speaker fits into the session. Share the audience guidelines with the birth parent. They are:
  - A. Audience must keep the birth parent speakers' identity and story confidential.
  - B. Any birth parent speaker can "pass" on any question they feel uncomfortable or unprepared to answer.
  - C. The trainer is there to support the birth parent and will intervene as necessary

3. Ask the parent to casually relate their story to you. Ask prompting question. Share with the birth parent that this is generally how the speaking engagement proceeds.
4. Ask if they have any questions or concerns. Offer to arrange for them to observe a birth parent speaker if they feel this would be helpful to them.

Pay the Birth Parent Speaker. The amount should be in the range of \$25-30 per session. Offer transportation/child care, if needed.

**Suggested Variation:** The Birth Parent Speaker may be accompanied by their children and the foster parent(s) who cared for them. This provides an excellent systems view of the teamwork, relationships and issues commonly encountered in placement.

### **Trainer Instructions for Facilitating Birth Parent Speaker in Class:**

Request that the birth parent speaker come to class and join it as if they are a participant. This anonymity will make the introduction of the speaker more dramatic (see below).

The trainer asks the group for their perceptions of who birth parents are and why they have put their children at risk for abuse/neglect. Record the group's observations on a flipchart.

Common responses are:

- |                                |                           |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| -sick, mentally ill, crazy     | -don't care about kids    |
| -lazy, stressed, clueless      | -selfish, self-centered   |
| -have been a victim themselves | -isolated, lonely         |
| -substance abusers             | -dangerous, unpredictable |

After 5-6 minutes of brainstorming, review the list and ask the group if they would like to meet "these kinds of people". The group usually responds, "No Way!". The trainer then notes that, "there is someone in this room whose children has been taken away... can you tell who it is?"

After a pause, ask the birth parent to come to the front of the room. Provide the group with the following guidelines:

1. The guest speaker is sharing his/her personal life; therefore, the listeners must be considerate and practice confidentiality. (What is said in the training, stays in the training)
2. If the guest speaker is uncomfortable with any question. S/he may pass.
3. The guest speaker is sharing his/her experiences from their perspective; therefore, there's no right or wrong answer.

**The following issues should be elicited highlighted during the presentation....**

- Birth parents are overwhelmed and don't intentionally hurt their children.
- Birth parents have a variety of problems that have developed over time.
- It's painful for birth parents when they are separated from their children.
- Birth parents want their children returned as soon as possible.
- Sometimes birth parents get depressed, frustrated and hopeless; therefore, not working on their case plan.
- Visitation is helpful in keeping birth parents motivated to work on their case plan.
- Foster parents can be supportive to birth parents and can assist them in being re-united with their children.

**The following is a list of *suggested questions* to use with birth parent guest speaker. Some experienced birth parent speakers may not need to be prompted by questions, but the trainer must ensure that the critical points made within the presentation. Trainers should keep the presentation moving by interjecting questions to help illicit key points. The presentation will move more smoothly if the trainer can "piggyback" on the content presented by the birth parent to move to other points. NOTE: There is no "right" order to the questions.**

- ② Tell the class about your children.
- ② Why were your children separated from you?
- ② Describe the events that led up to their removal.
- ② How and why did things get so bad?
- ② How did you feel?
- ② What thoughts went through your mind?
- ② How did you act?
- ② How did your children respond?
- ② Did you know where your children were living?
- ② How did that make you feel?
- ② What was on your case plan?
- ② Was it hard to complete your case plan?
- ② What kept you motivated?
- ② Did you visit with your children? How often? Where? Did it help?
- ② Did you have contact with the foster parents? How? When? Where? Did it help?
- ② What did the foster parent do to help you stay in contact with your children?  
Did it help? What more could they have done?
- ② Why are birth parents important to kids in foster care?
- ② What responsibilities do birth parents have?

### **Last Question**

- ② *What advice do you have for foster parents that would help them work with children and their birth families?\*\*\**

**\*\*\*This should be the last question to the birth parent and should be asked by the trainer. The trainer should ask a few of the above questions and then allow participants to ask questions. The trainer should also clarify participant's questions if necessary and ask other questions, which may be relevant.**

The trainer should assist the birth parent in the presentation. The trainer should field questions from the participants and if inappropriate, the trainer should handle the situation by answering the question on a general basis or "pass" for the parent.

The trainer should summarize the important points of the presentation by asking the group what they have learned about birth parents today. Common responses should now be overwhelmed, stressed, unsupported, everyday common people. Compliment the group on the progress they made in developing a more realistic and open-minded view of birth parents. Point out this new attitude will help the participants become more effective as foster and adoptive parents.

### **After the Presentation**

It is helpful to have a break after the presentation as the participants are generally anxious to speak to the birth parent personally.

Therefore the presentation should be scheduled prior to the break or at the end of class to allow for this.

