

CORE: Teen

CRITICAL ON-GOING RESOURCE FAMILY EDUCATION

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Characteristics of successful resource families in working with the older youth who have moderate to serious emotional and behavioral challenges

Attunement - the ability to be aware of, understand and be sensitive to the specific responses and needs of a youth at any given time, despite the degree to which the youth expresses these needs directly. Being in tune with moods, exhaustion, hunger, rhythms, responses, and needs for physical contact, affection, security, stimulation, and movement, with the goal of building a trusting environment. Being sensitive and empathic and staying regulated while helping the youth regulate their emotions.

Acceptance - an understanding and a sense of respect for youth who bring a different set of values with them. They are able to reconcile that the youth's behaviors and values may not align with their personal values and that this will feel uncomfortable and at times very wrong. They know that if not resolved/accepted, this can be a real source of discontent, tension and conflict.

Advocate – the ability to challenge the “status quo” and bend the rules to help their youth succeed. They are aware of their right and responsibility to speak on behalf of their children, and know that they provide a sense of security for their children by being in charge and by advocating for them.

Adaptability / Flexibility - the willingness and ability to make changes in their parenting style/responses to be accommodating, encouraging and supportive to the needs of the youth. They share the responsibility of caring for children and are not restricted by typical male/female, adult/child, or conventional kinship roles. Successful resource parents are comfortable acknowledging when something isn't working and able to try a different approach, or modify the expectation to the needs of different youth based on their experienced physical and emotional trauma. These methods help youth develop the skills and abilities to grow and strengthen their own internal competencies and compassion for others. Understands that creating a new family requires accepting that enormous changes, some predictable, but many not, will occur. Caregivers recognize that a child cannot move in and adjust totally to the family as it exists, but rather the family must do some adjusting and changing as well. They are willing to make changes and are comfortable with unknowns.

Appreciation - the ability to identify opportunities to recognize (sincerely compliment) the youth's good work or good effort. They acknowledge and appreciate small steps toward reaching a goal.

Attentiveness - the ability to concentrate on the most important event/element at a given time. It begins with the observation of an event and the conscious effort to observe it and gather information on why it's happening and what the best response would be.

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Collaborative / Team Player - The family needs to be viewed as a team that works together. When problems arise, they concentrate on the family as a unit, rather than on one specific member. This may mean that roles within the family need to adjust and remain focused on the specific need / concern. If the caregivers begin to compartmentalize thinking and remain committed to traditional roles within the family, this can lead to blaming and scapegoating.

Compassion – the ability to perceive/feel the anguish of the youth. It requires that the resource parent look past the current behavior and find the core distress related to the youth response. They know they cannot shield the child from pain, but must allow the child to experience and express pain and grief.

Committed – the ability to be dedicated to a youth, sticking with them no matter how difficult the journey. Carefully and consciously considering the requirements of fostering a youth and understanding that it is not about fulfilling their own needs. They recognize the role may not offer much validation and reinforcement of their skills and talents, but are willing to commit to the long-term unconditional parenting and promoting child well-being. They believe in commitment, and are able to persevere in the face of adversity. They are secure in their commitment to their children and know that they are doing the right thing.

Communicators – good at expressing themselves clearly and actively listening to others. Caregivers who can express their feelings are ready to become good role models in expression.

Creativity - This is often referred to as “thinking outside the box.” Caregivers are able to take situations and view them from a “fresh” perspective, offering innovative and unconventional insight into existing challenges. Caregivers have the ability to perceive situations/events and behaviors in new ways.

Honoring Relationships / Attachments – the ability to recognize and value the importance of all prior relationships to the youth. Shows respect for the birth family and previous relationships and to the youth. Understands the youth’s self-perception and identity is based on current and former attachments. Caregivers move beyond any anger or jealousy they may feel toward birth families in order to help the children resolve relationship issues with birth family members and former foster families to ultimately grieve losses, maintain connections, and feel good about themselves.

Hopeful – having the ability to maintain a positive outlook and focusing on possibilities; being optimistic. Successful resource parents have a unique ability to remain hopeful, even in the face of very small gains.

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Integrity – the ability to be honest and truthful in a manner that conveys compassion and understanding of differences. Follows the golden rule: “treating others as you would wish to be treated.” The ability to be candid and transparent in communication; no hidden agendas or meanings that are not communicated. Successful resource families understand they are not perfect and will reflect on the situation and use it as an honest opportunity to model how to nurture a thoughtful relationship.

Lifelong learner - Embracing every learning opportunity with a sense of adventure and curiosity. Seeking knowledge without knowing the answers. Understanding that there is usually no simple answer or response that fits all youth and situations. Believing that learning continues through the lifespan of all adults and staying open to all possibilities. The sincere desire to seek understanding and approaching new situations with openness and enthusiasm. Conveying a sense of playfulness in learning rather than rigidity.

Motivated– feeling inspired and driven to become a caregiver and support the needs of youth enthusiastically.

Patience/Perseverance – the ability to “wait” for answers / solutions without giving up. Having a sense of determination and persistence to ensure the needs of youth are met, but also recognizing solutions / answers may be slow in presenting themselves. Able to feel uncertain and afraid and yet continue to search for answers. They stay strong in the face of difficulty and stand up for what they believe in and what is right. Facing challenges and new situations with a sense of determination and encouragement.

Predictable and Consistent – the ability of caregivers to be reliable, dependable, stable and unswerving. Youth are able to develop a sense of trust and safety as they can anticipate reactions and outcomes as a result of the consistency and predictability. Caregivers have the strength to set limits while balancing the unique needs of the youth and situation (not being rigid). Successful resource families understand that for youth to feel safe and heal they need to have consistency and structure.

Resourcefulness - knowing how to identify and use help when needed. They regard the use of supports as a strength and are not afraid to ask for help. They know that they are not alone in their experiences and feelings. They reach out for help in many forms, ranging from self-help support groups to therapy. They also let others into their family system provide additional support. Beyond their immediate household, they build a network of supporters who will help in times of crisis. They are willing and able to pull people into their lives, and find it natural to integrate another person into their family.

Resilient - able to withstand “testing” behaviors by their children, including hurtful, angry, rejecting comments and actions. They are willing to initiate interactions with their children without the

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expectation of “give and take.” They can tolerate giving love without expecting much in return and don’t take it personally when children reject their overtures. They do not expect their children to reciprocate or express appreciation for their efforts.

Risk Taking –Those who are comfortable seeking and welcoming new challenges and new relationships without a sense of dread tend to be more successful. Successful resource families understand that the job of parenting and healing a youth will include many times of “not knowing what to do” or that other helping professionals won’t have the answers either. They are ok with trying new approaches and advocating for services that some may consider non-conventional.

Realistic – having an understanding that there will be varying degrees of success with different situations and with different youth. They understand that the efforts that they provide may not be realized in a change in a youths understanding or behavior until much later. They are able to make mistakes, adjustments and allowances as they re-evaluate expectations.

Security/Self-Confidence – the ability to get beyond the “WWPT’s” (“What will people think?”) – accepting the fact that their children may embarrass them in public, their friends may disapprove of their choices, and that the family they created through foster care or adoption may not “look like” the average family. They feel confident that they are doing the right thing and do not dwell on the opinions of others. The capacity to feel they can successfully parent and manage doing things for youth to help them grow and learn, protect them, address concerns, and perform other parenting responsibilities. They trust that whether or not they ever get a “thank you,” the rewards of raising their children will come later.

Self-awareness / Self-regulation - knowing how to take care of themselves, because they know they have to be strong to take care of the children. They feel good about taking personal time as a couple, and as individuals. They take breaks and use respite care to prevent burnout. Has a tolerance for ambivalent and negative feelings in oneself. Caregivers need to have the ability to expect some powerful and negative feelings in reaction to the child’s behaviors and to understand that those feelings are normal and can pass. They accept the new complications in their lives -- such as community criticism -- that results from raising children from the system. They do not personalize these issues. This will allow the caregiver to forgive themselves for having negative feelings; moving from disappointment to acceptance.

Self-Control / Tolerant – having a sense of self-discipline, willpower, tolerance and self-restraint. Recognizing the value of regulating one’s own emotional responses and modeling that behavior for youth. They allow themselves to get angry and trust themselves not to act on that anger. They do not

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personalize these issues. Successful resource families remain committed when “the warm, mushy feelings are gone.”

Sense of Humor – The use of humor to cope with the stress that can result from raising children who have lived in the child welfare system. They allow themselves to laugh and find humor in daily exchanges with their children. They also help their children to “lighten up” and experience the fun, playfulness, and laughter of family life.

Solution focused problem-solving – They avoid linear thinking, and instead examine a problem from many angles, using creative solution thinking. They are comfortable with collaborative decision-making; looking for the best solution rather than the easy answer. They have the ability to take complex issues and focus on the importance and reason for solving it. This allows resource parents to approach problems by taking small steps towards the solution. This method helps improve the situation as quickly as possible and helps parents increase their own problem solving skills. Parents clarify the reasons why an issue/behavior or response needs to be improved/resolved and then puts their energy towards the solution. This works for situation where there is little understanding of why the behavior is occurring or when the behaviors trigger core value/belief/attitudes.

Spirituality – Resource families who have a sense of perspective (spirituality) take one day at a time; “today was hell, but tomorrow will be better.” There is an understanding of the long-term nature of change; typically accompanied by a sense of spirituality and a positive outlook on life. They view the world as a potentially good place and the future is promising. This can also translate into a belief that there is a reason for everything, so they can endure. Believing there is a “bigger meaning” to their purpose supports a long-term commitment to the youth and their potential.

Supportive - Supportive resource families redirect and support the development of new behaviors through sympathy, empathy, thoughtful and respectful transactions between resource parents and youth. Supportive resource parents move from being reacting to behavior (sometimes as a way of becoming more self-regulated) to being an investigator on a mission to discover the needs leading to the behavior. This allows the resource parent to be in a position to craft solutions together with the youth, while keeping all parties dignity intact.

Trustworthiness - Being able to create an environment that helps develop trust and attachment starts with preparation of yourself and for the youth. Trust and attachment is based on understanding the importance of consistency, routines and rituals and then being able to implement these. It requires the ability to be in tune with a youth - being aware of, and responsive to how they are feeling.

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