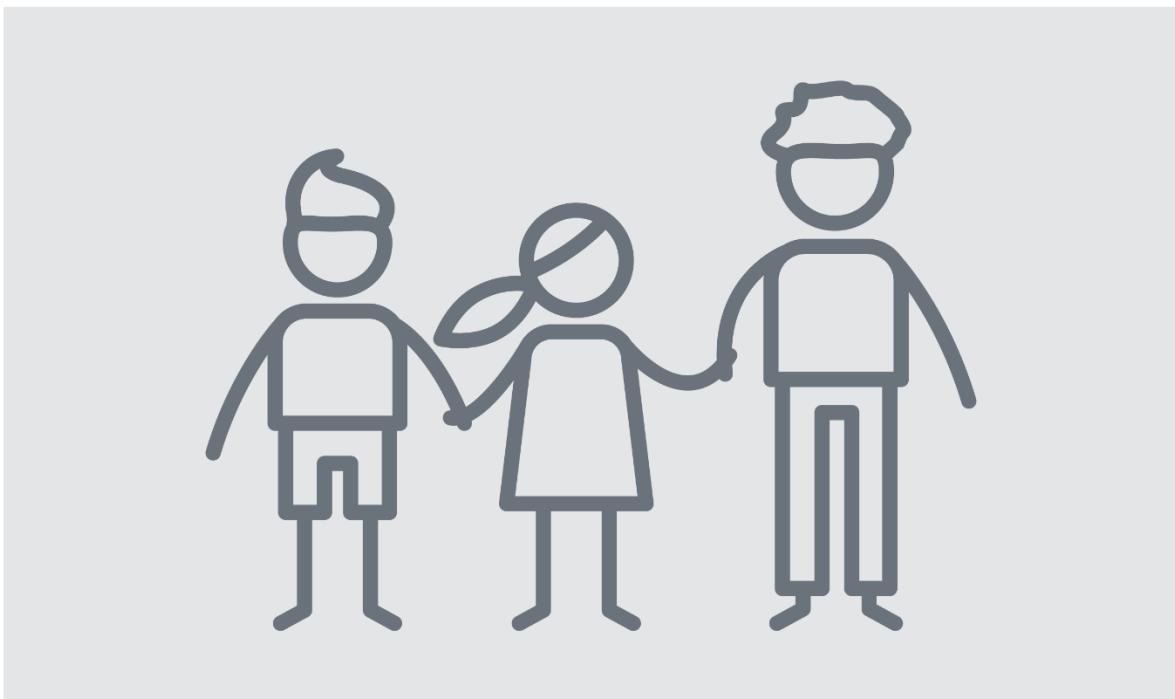


CHILDREN'S SERVICES  
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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# Nurturing Child and Youth Connections

Participant Manual



Alberta

Children's Services, Government of Alberta

April 2022

Nurturing Child and Youth Connections

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*We respectfully acknowledge that we are on Treaty Territories and Metis Settlements, traditional gathering places for diverse Indigenous peoples and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our communities and how we train, learn, and work.*

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## Caregiver Training: Nurturing Child and Youth Connections

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Every effort has been made to provide acknowledgement of original sources. If there is content that has not been acknowledged accurately, please notify WFD so appropriate corrective action can be taken.

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## Icon Summary

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Individual exercise / reflection



Video



Small group activity



Checklist



Large group discussion

# Nurturing Child and Youth Connections

Connections and relationships are important for everyone. Research shows how connections support a child's safety and well-being. Legislation recognizes the importance of these connections.

As a caregiver you can help the children and youth in your care to maintain and build connections with the people who are important to them.

In this module you will explore through reflection and large group discussion:

- The importance of connections for the wellbeing of children and youth.
- Your role in helping the child or youth in your care to build relationships.
- Strategies to help you in your role.

## **Learning Objectives**

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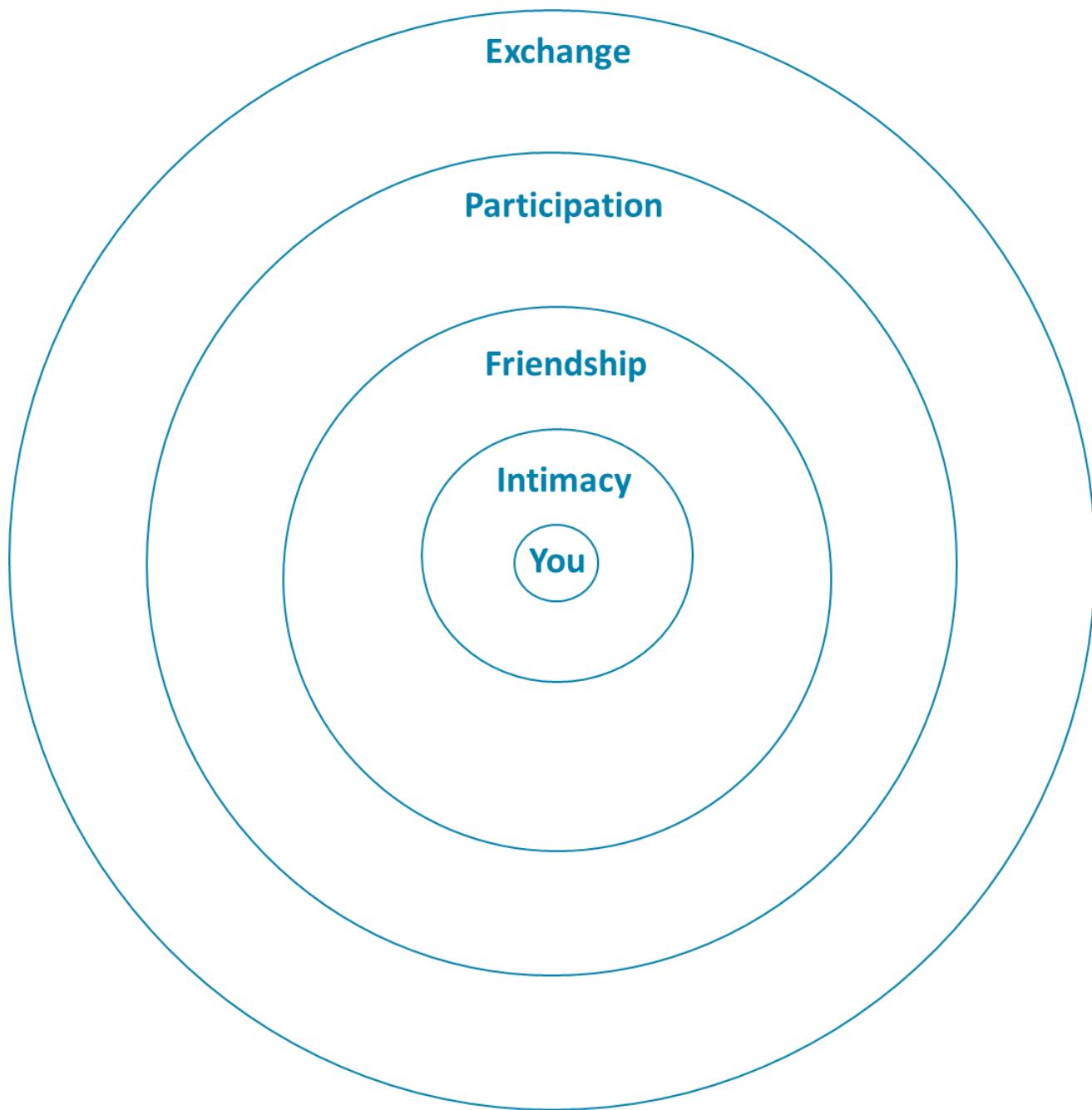
After you've finished this module, you will be able to:

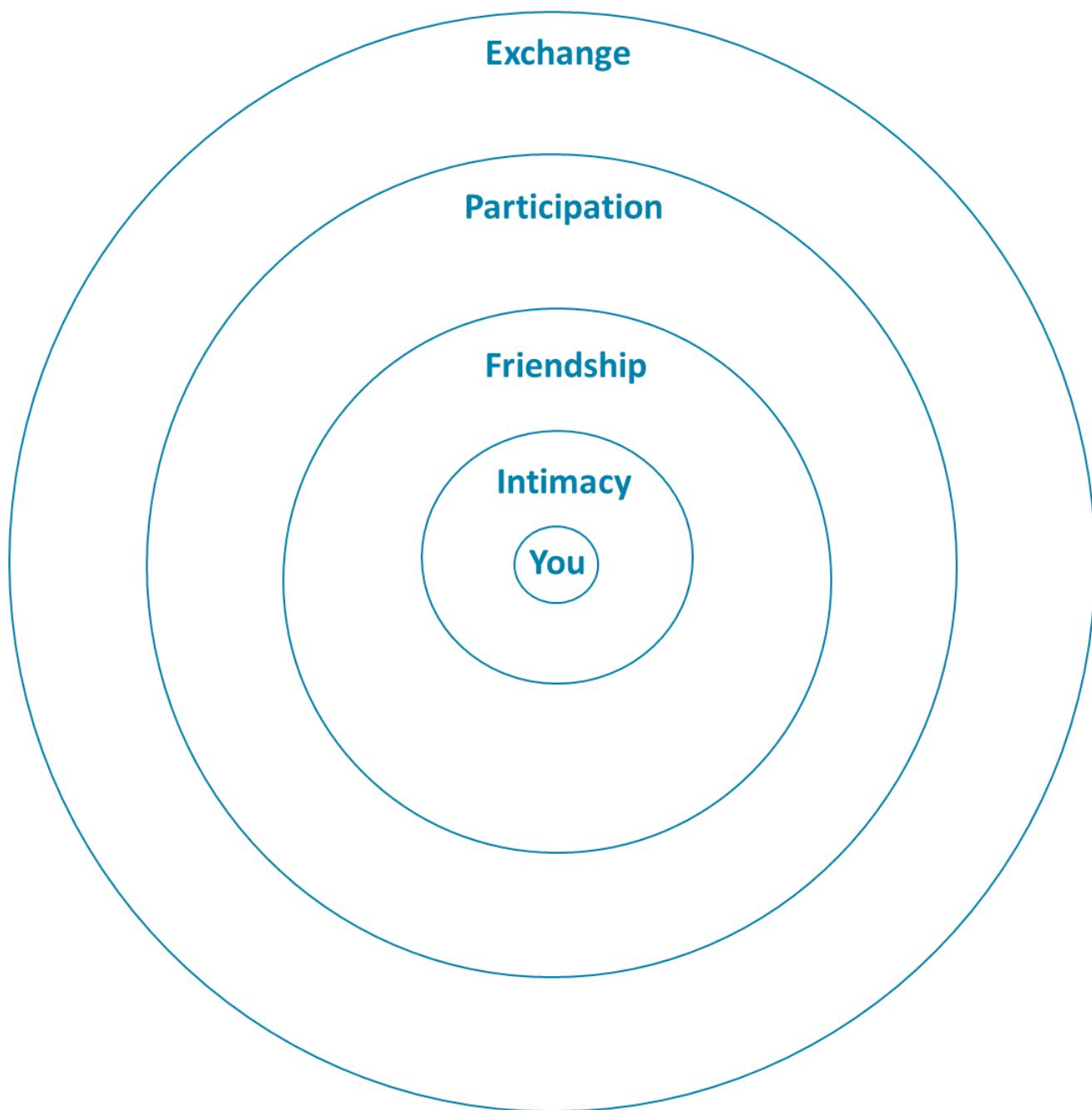
- Explain how a family might feel about having their child or youth in care
- Describe how lifelong connections are important for child and youth wellness
- Build respectful relationships with the people who are important to the children and youth in your care
- Explain the roles of the caregiver support team in nurturing child and youth connections
- Meet challenges you may experience when nurturing child and youth connections



## Your Connections

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## Meaningful Connections

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Select the most important people you identified above. For each person, consider the following questions below:

- What is your relationship with them (e.g., mother, teacher)?
- What are the benefits of this relationship? Why is the person important to you?
- How did you develop a connection with them?
- What do you do to maintain and build your bond with them?

People who have meaningful connections are healthier, happier, and more fulfilled.



## Why Build and Maintain Connections?

Children or youth who are in care need to spend time with family members and other important people in their lives. This helps them develop healthy connections and relationship bonds. Lasting relationships reach far beyond concepts of legal permanence, placement or planning. Family and community relationships create safety, well-being and a sense of connection.

- Meaningful, life-long connections to a family and community of support is the single factor most closely associated with positive outcomes for children and youth (Campbell, 2017)

As children and youth move through different developmental stages, meaningful connections provide them with:

- Knowledge of their origins, family history and culture
- An understanding of who they are
- Self esteem and self worth

Connection to culture, language, religion, customs, belief systems, social roles, celebrations and/or birthplace helps to:

- Develop a sense of identity
- Reduce feelings of loss, rejection, self-blame and abandonment
- Confirm they are important
- Increase well-being



Rewind

How do relationships help a child/youth develop a cultural identity?

Family relations are a central part of any child's life.

Children who are separated from their families experience many kinds of loss.



## Four Areas of Connection

Four areas of connection support planning for children and youth in care. These four areas of connection help them stay connected to important people in their lives. We want to ensure that children and youth grow up with:

- People who love them unconditionally.
- Strong ties to family, communities and culture.

The four areas of connection are:

- **Relational:** Lasting connections with family, friends, caregivers and others. These important people provide a sense of belonging, unconditional love, and acceptance. These are the people a child or youth can rely on in times of need.
- **Physical:** A place to call home that is stable, safe, and welcoming. Children and youth need a place where they feel they truly belong.
- **Cultural:** Participation and connection to one's history. This includes language, religion, customs, belief systems, social roles, celebrations and/or birthplace. Cultural connections build a strong sense of identity, self-esteem and self-worth.
- **Legal:** Formally recognized membership in a family. This provides legal security.

Relational connections are defined by children, youth, and their families. This may include connections by birth and many other kinds of relationships.



## Nurturing Connections through Tough Times

When a child or youth's connections are interrupted, it is important to re-establish them quickly. Their safety, health, and well-being depends on it.



### Caregiver Role in Nurturing Connections

What is the Caregiver role in helping children and youth in their care build and maintain connections?

What does it look like when you are doing this well?

What can get in the way?

Every child and youth has a right to belong securely to a family that honours their familial ties, culture and community connections.



## Thinking about Children and Youth in Care

Children and youth come into care because they are not safe in their home. Despite this, case teams must help to maintain family connections. You are part of the case team and share this important responsibility. However, you may also worry about the safety of family connections for the child/youth in your care. It is important for you to be aware of and participate in the Safety Plan.

### Meet Carly and Dustin

- Carly is a 24-year-old single mother. Her son, Dustin, is a 5-year-old boy.
- Children's Services received two reports about Carly and Dustin.

#### Concerns:

- Carly uses drugs
- Carly left Dustin home alone.
- Carly left drugs and needles where Dustin could access them.

#### Six months ago:

- Carly left Dustin home alone overnight
- While alone, Dustin burned himself while trying to cook eggs.
- Dustin asked the neighbour for a Band-Aid.
- Dustin told the neighbour that his mom was away with friends.
- The neighbour reported her concerns CS.
- The neighbour then took Dustin to hospital for his burn.
- CS went to the hospital.
- CS asked Carly to meet the caseworker and Dustin at the hospital.
- At the hospital, Carly wore dirty clothing and her hair was messy. She had dark circles under her eyes and was jumpy.

CS develop a safety plan with Carly and her support network. Safety plan agreements were:

- Carly's cousin, John, agreed to stay with Dustin when Carly was not available.
- Carly agreed to make sure that a sober adult always supervised Dustin.

One week after Carly signed the safety plan, a neighbour reported that Dustin was at home alone again.

- The caseworker went to the home and found Dustin alone.
- The caseworker found used needles on the coffee table.
- The only food in the home was a jar of jam and some milk.

Carly was not able to follow her agreements in the safety plan. Dustin was not safe in his home. CS identified Dustin as a child in the need of intervention.

- CS arranged an Apprehension Order and Interim Custody Order for Dustin. Carly's cousin was not able to provide him with full time care. No other family members or people close to Dustin were able to care for him. Dustin was placed in a foster home.



## Thinking About Carly

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What are your thoughts and feelings about Carly?

Imagine that Dustin is in your care. How might your thoughts and feelings about Carly impact the relationship between Dustin and his mom?

What might Carly think and feel about her son being in care?



## **Parenting Can Be Tough**

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Think about a time when you felt angry with your own child/youth or someone else's child/youth.

What was it like to feel so angry toward the child/youth?

After, how did you feel? What did you do?

How do you feel about sharing this information with:

- Someone you don't know well?
- The group?

How would you feel if you had to share this with a caseworker?

Does this exercise change your thoughts and feelings about Carly?

## **Meet Carson and Angela**

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- Carson and Angela have two daughters.
- Carson and Angela both heavy drinkers.

### **Carson has been violent**

- Carson has a bad temper and has been violent with Angela and the children:
  - He has broken Angela's arm, ribs, and nose (twice).
  - The oldest daughter has had stitches on her cheek and a broken wrist.
  - The youngest daughter has had a sprained ankle and stitches on her head and eye.
  - Both parents said the children were injured by accident (e.g., a fall, from wrestling, a slip).
- Carson has a history of sexually abuse:
  - The oldest daughter was six when her dad started the sexual abuse.
  - There is some evidence that Carson may have sexually abused the youngest daughter.

### **Children removed from parent's care**

- The girls were 12 and seven when they were removed from their parents' care.
- CS placed the children with their maternal Grandmother, Beth.
- The girls had many challenging behaviours which Beth struggled to manage.
- The older daughter:
  - Was aggressive with Beth and ran away from home.
  - After one year, she moved into foster care.
  - She lived in three different foster homes before the age of 15.
  - At 16, she moved in with her boyfriend.
  - At 19 she became pregnant
  - She gave birth to a baby boy who she loved very much.
  - Her boyfriend worked out of town most of the time.
  - She felt trapped in their apartment when he was away.
  - She was angry that the baby had restricting her life
  - When the baby cried, she sometimes cried too from frustration.

### **Spanked her son**

Late one night, the baby had been crying for hours. She held him and walked him through the apartment, but he kept crying. Finally, out of frustration, she spanked him and told him to stop crying. As she spanked her son, a lifetime of anger burst out of her. She suddenly found herself screaming and spanking her baby as hard as she could.

- When she stopped, she felt horrified at what she had done.
- She left her crying baby in his crib and went for a walk. The tears ran down her face as she walked and walked and walked.

### **Relationship with boyfriend**

At the same time, her relationship with her boyfriend was going poorly:

- When he was in town, he would drink heavily.
- He introduced her to drugs.

- She was even more frustrated by the demands of the baby. She wished for time alone with her boyfriend.
- There were more fights between she and her boyfriend
  - More than once, he gave her a bloody nose or a black eye.
  - When her boyfriend lost his job, the fights became more frequent and more violent.
  - They struggled to pay their bills.

### **Made changes in her life**

She left her boyfriend and hoped to pull her life together:

- She tried to stop using drugs and alcohol.
- She struggled with money even more than before
- She often could not afford food.
- She never had enough money to buy things her child needed.
- She became lonely and very depressed.
- A friend moved near by. She often visited him and they used drugs together.
- Her boy was now five years old. She started leaving him alone at home.

### **Visits from Children's Services**

Children's Services came to see her several times:

- The first time she convinced them the report was false.
- The second time, CS came to the hospital. Her son was burned after she left him alone overnight.
- She created a safety plan with CS. She agreed to ensure supervision for her son.
- Two weeks after signing the safety plan she left her son home alone again.
- Carly was not able to create safety in the home. Dustin was apprehended and he is now in foster care.

Carly was deeply hurt at the loss of her son. She asked the caseworker what she could do to get Dustin back.



## **Thinking about Carly**

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How do you feel about Carson and Angela?

How did you feel toward Carly now? Has anything changed?

If you were caring for Dustin, would this new perspective change your relationship with Carly?

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**It is understandable that caregivers hold reluctance to keep contact with birth families due to the nature of the apprehension and placement of the child**

Nelson, 2017

## Impact of Separation on the Families of Children and Youth



Remember what you learned in other modules:

- What losses do children and youth experience when they are placed in care?
- How might this impact their behaviour?

Both the child/youth and their parents experience losses when a child/youth is placed into care. This adds to their experience of trauma.



### Behaviour is Communication

Children, youth and their parents may communicate their trauma in different ways. This can include:

- Crying
- Angry outbursts
- Frequent bathroom trips
- Self isolation
- Missing scheduled family time.

Carly has had many traumatic life experiences. This includes the recent loss of her son.

What behaviours might we see from Carly:

- During family time with Dustin?
- At the end of family time?
- When talking with Dustin's caregiver?

What behaviours might we see from Dustin:

- Before family time?
- During family time?
- At the end of family time?
- The day after family time?

How can a caregiver help Carly?



People aware of trauma ask,  
“What happened to them?”  
NOT  
“What’s wrong with them?”

How can a caregiver help Dustin?

## **Supporting Families After Separation from Children/Youth**

- Recognize the impact on the child/youth's family.
- Recognize the grieving process.
  - Allow parents to express their grief.
- Support the parents.
  - Ask how they feel.
  - Talk with them about the child/youth.
- Discuss how you will nurture family connections.
- Build your relationship with the family.
  - Work together for the child/youth's safety and well-being.

## Important People in the Child/ Youth's Life

As a caregiver, you don't just bring children/youth into your home. You must also build relationships with the important people in the child/youth's life. This is critical to help them maintain and build their lifelong connections.



### The Child/Youth's Connections

Think of a child/youth in your home. Who are their important connections? Why?

Who would the child/youth say are their important connections? Why?

Who would their parents say are the child/youth's important connections? Why?

How can you help the child/youth strengthen these connections?

Family relations are a central part of any child/youth's life. Separating children/youth from their families creates many kinds of losses.





## Your Connection Matters

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Think about your own experience building important connections. How can this help you to build important connections for the children/youths in your care?

## Nurturing Sibling Relationships



### Sibling Connections

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Think back to your important relationships and the role of your connections with siblings:

- What built connections with your siblings?
- How did your siblings create a sense of belonging and identity?
- If an only child, who were other children that you connected with to create a sense of belonging?
- How do siblings play a part in your life now?

## **Why Sibling Connect is Important**

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A growing body of literature supports the critical role of siblings in helping children in out-of-home care maintain a sense of continuity with family (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Hegar, 1988; Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Whelan, 2003). Mental and emotional wellbeing is linked to positive sibling relationships. Being close to a sibling improves the sense of belonging. Siblings living in different caregiver homes were reported to have more unstable lives.

Biological siblings who are in touch or raised together have higher self-esteem, social support, stronger relationships, and are more successful professionally as adults. Studies show the positive impact of keeping siblings in care together on behavioural responses and academic performance along with overall behavioral and social dealing of routine issues.

## **Building Sibling Connections**

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While most of the current research is about the importance of building sibling connections, we can draw from our own experiences for ways to support connections. Make sure that you are mindful of finding ways to connect siblings throughout the lifespan.

### **Ideas for Connecting Siblings Who Live Together**

- Special sibling time where they connect with each other
- Find ways they can help each other with projects and tasks
- Be guided by their relationships and what they like to do together
- Others?

### **Ideas for Connecting Siblings Who Live Apart**

- Make family time a priority
- Provide regular times to connect by phone or virtually
- Find out how family traditions that you can connect around
- Celebrate occasions together
- Any of the ideas listed above
- Others?

## Connecting Children and Youth to Their Culture



Rewind

How can you help a child or youth build connections with their culture?

### Family Culture

Every family has a culture: “How we do things around here.” The positive rituals and traditions a child/youth experiences can create comfort.

What family traditions and rituals do you treasure from growing up? (They can be large or small)



#### Questions:

For the child/youth in your care:

- What special occasions are celebrated by their family?
- How are special occasions celebrated?
- What traditions and rituals do they practice?
- What is dinner time like?
- What is bedtime like?

What can you do to support these “family traditions”?

## Community Culture

Community culture may be part of where we live (e.g., city or country). Community culture may be part of our ethnic heritage. We all have connections to traditions of our community.



What are some community traditions and rituals you treasure from growing up?

### Questions:

For the child/youth in your care:

- How do they describe their community?
- What community traditions or rituals have they experienced?
- What connects them with the values or worldview of their community?

## The Ups and Downs of Relationships

All relationships have good and bad days.



Think about the people you put into your relationship circles.

What helps make these relationships work?

What can get in the way?

How do you deal with the stuff that gets in the way?

## Navigating Challenges



What worries you about supporting the child/youth's connections?

What are some ways you can navigate these challenges?

## Basics of Effective Relationships

- Have a shared goal.
  - You and the family both care about the child/youth.
- Recognize similarities and differences.
  - Think about what you have in common. Build on it.
  - Recognize that you may have experienced less trauma than the family or may have had more supports when facing challenges.
  - Recognize that you may have many advantages compared with the family.
- Practice compassion for the child/youth's family.
  - What support would you want on the worst days in your life?
  - Judge less, understand more.
- Be respectful, always.
  - You don't need to approve of the family's parenting style, values or morals.
    - It is important not to confuse safety and well being with parenting style.
  - Your behaviour can be an example of respect.

### Top Tips for Supporting Relationships

*Creating a Family* website suggests the following tips:

- Use technology to share photos, videos and stories about the child/youth's day.
- Share artwork and other projects the child/youth has made.
- Schedule regular video or phone chats.
- Choose an attitude of openness and respect.
- Ask family members about what the child/youth likes and dislikes.
  - What has worked to get them to do homework?
  - How have they handled their fear of going to the doctor?
  - Involving them will set the tone for a relationship.
- Take time to talk. Ask how they are doing. Listen carefully when they share.
- Attend team meetings, court appointments and visits as often as you can.
- Model clear communication with the case team.

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**Building a supportive relationship with the child/youth's parents will often feel like co-parenting. That's a good thing!**

*Creating a Family*

## What You Can Do to Build the Relationship

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- Recognize **family strengths**.
- Honour the love the parents have for their children.
- Understand the value of the **parent–child relationship**.
- Put the parent–child relationship first.
- Be hopeful.
- **Be flexible** with the family's needs.
- Express **understanding** towards the parents and family members.
- **Seek support and help**
- **Get to know the child or youth's family.**



**Remember:** Your role is to benefit the children and youth in your care. This means supporting family reunification when possible. (Nesmith, Patton, Christopheson & Smart, 2017, Para 7)

## Help Them Understand You!

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- Invite family members into your life, if possible. Let them get to know you.
- Reverse the roles in your mind. What would you want to know about the people caring for your child/youth?
- Be clear about what is important to you. Set clear boundaries.

Caregiver families do not replace the child/youth's family.

You enhance their connection with their family.





## Boundaries

Boundaries are needed in all relationships. They set the limits between you and others.

Think about your relationships with the families of children and youth you care for.

What do your boundaries look like?

How do you support the child/youth's family with regard to:

- Sharing personal information?
- Birthdays, holidays, special occasions?
- Family time? Phone calls? Texts?

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**We must strive to create trust and mutuality between ourselves and family members and other significant people in the child's life. This is a healthy influence for a developing child and will help empower families so they in turn can be more effective and caring parents!**

Swick and Willilams, 2006

## You are Part of a Team: You Are Not Alone:

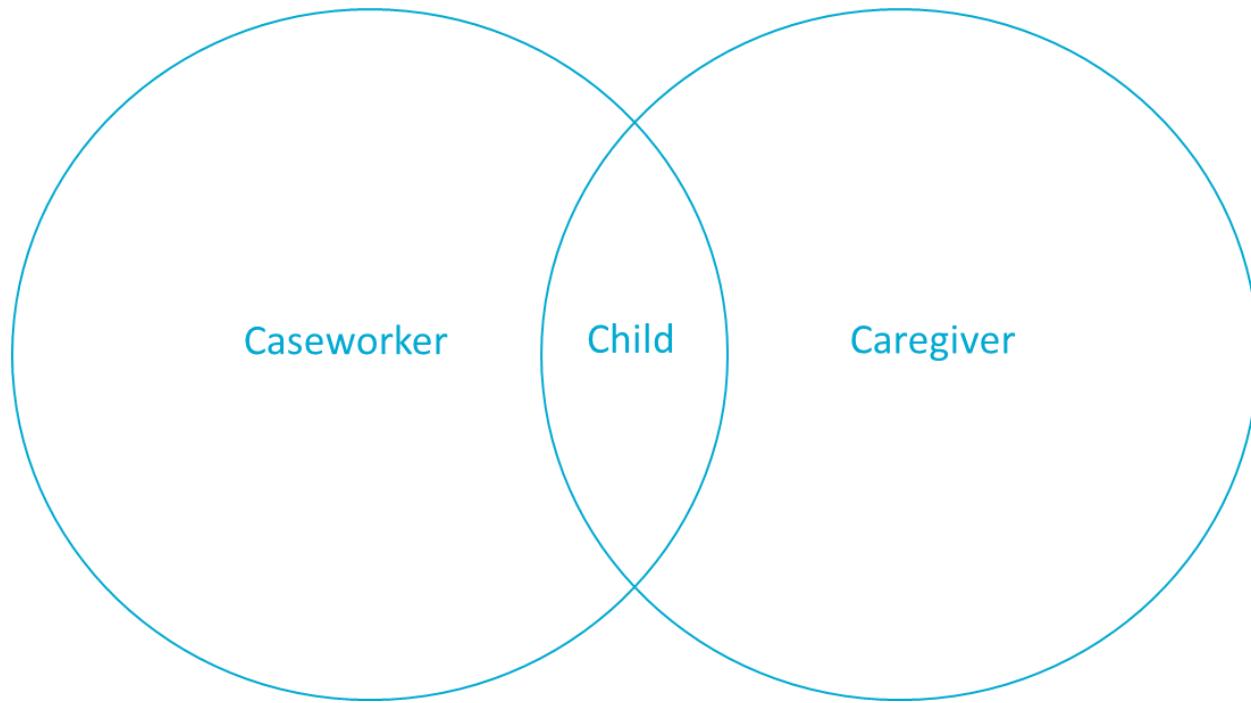
You play a central role in helping the children and youth in your care to build meaningful connections. Always remember you have a team to help you in this role!

- The case team can support you as you build relationships with family members and other important connections.



### Roles on the Team

Think about the roles of the caregiver and the caseworker in supporting children and youth to develop and maintain connections.



What can each role do?

How can you draw the family into the team?

What are some of your worries when working with the caregiver team?

How can you address these worries?



## **Relationship Successes**

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Think about the good relationships you have with the people who are important to the child/youth in your care.

How do these good relationships make you feel?

What makes these relationships work?

What have you learned?

How can you use these successes to build more effective relationships?

## Action Planning



What is one thing you can do to nurture connections for the children/youth in your home?

What were the key things you learned today?

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# Course Evaluation/ Feedback

## Nurturing Child and Youth Connections

Date:

We greatly appreciate your honest feedback on the workshop you just attended. It will help improve future versions of this workshop. Please circle the option that best represents how you feel about the following statements and make your comments about what works and suggestions for improvement.

### Learning Objectives

*As a result of the workshop, I am able to:*

<b>1</b>	Explain how a family might feel about having their child or youth in care.	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree
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Comments:

<b>2</b>	Describe how lifelong connections are important for child and youth wellness.	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree
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Comments:

<b>3</b>	Build respectful relationships with the people who are important to the children and youth in your care.	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree
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Comments:

<b>4</b>	Explain the roles of the caregiver support team in nurturing child and youth connections.	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree
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Comments:

5	Meet challenges you may experience when nurturing child and youth connections.	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree
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Comments:

## Summary

**List three things you learned as a result of the workshop.**

**Explain how the workshop is relevant to your role as a caregiver and how it will enhance your caregiver experience.**

**Provide at least 1 suggestion to improve the content, delivery and/or activities.**

The information that you provide in this form is to be used in the continued development of the workshop and activities. It is collected under the authority of, and in compliance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and will not be used for any other purpose.

(Optional) Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_