

The Reflective Foster Parent

By Michael Neff, P.C.

Public policy in New York "invites" foster parents to work with birth families to help achieve family reunification, by building bridges with birth parents; sharing parenting with birth parents to keep them involved in the lives of their children; and joining with birth parents as reunification partners to assist them to prepare for the safe return of their children. These roles/functions call on foster parents to acquire and practice beliefs, attitudes, commitments, and aptitudes different from those that have long guided foster parent parenting and may be difficult for some foster parents to accept or achieve.

Foster parent effectiveness in performing these "new" roles is less a matter of acquiring knowledge and refining skills than of accessing, acknowledging and confronting what's "truly so for one's self" through self reflection. Not for the purpose of identifying shortcomings, but for the purpose of discovering and activating innate (but untapped) competencies. Foster parents today are challenged to consider and reflect upon:

- **Respectfulness:** How open am I to accepting the feelings and aspirations of birth parents without having to discredit or denigrate them? How willing am I to accept them as persons important in the lives of their children regardless of their bad, even grievous, mistakes.
- **Forgiveness:** How all right with me is it that others are imperfect and make mistakes?
- **Relatedness:** How much can I be me with birth parents and not play a role?
- **Flexibility:** How spontaneous and creative can I be in my interactions with birth parents without having to stick with preconceived notions of what needs to be done?
- **Attentiveness:** How able am I to stay focused on other people's needs or concerns and not withdraw into my own thoughts, or become distracted by my own inner voices?
- **Self-Awareness:** How connected and turned in am I to my own deeper values and spiritual roots, and how able am I to access and activate them in order to serve others.
- **Humility:** How able am I to not have to dominate or control?
- **Assertiveness:** How comfortable am I speaking out, asking questions to clarify and gain certainty and being firm?
- **Directness:** How willing am I to talk straight, to say what's so?



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