

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC podcast, Creating a Stable, Nurturing, and Safe Environment. I'm your host April Dinwoodie. The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents, or NTDC, is a five-year cooperative agreement from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families Children's Bureau.

In this episode, we welcome Elizabeth Richmond. Elizabeth works for the Illinois State Department of Children and Family Services, as Lead Foster Parent Support Specialist, providing support services to foster and adoptive families. Elizabeth and her husband have been foster parents for 26 years, and have fostered over 30 children, adopting three from foster care. Welcome to the podcast, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Richm...: Great to be here, April.

April Dinwoodie: So good to have you, and I know that your contributions to this conversation are going to be so, so very important. So let's jump right in. How do consistency and boundaries help children feel safe?

Elizabeth Richm...: Consistency is an important part of creating an emotionally safe environment for children. When a plan or routine changes, even if it's something that we might think of as small or insignificant, it can have a really big impact on a child.

Similarly, when adults don't do what they say they're going to do, this inconsistency can feel threatening to a child, who may have had plans in the past, when they change, result in the child being unsafe. When building trust with children, it's extremely important that you say what you mean, and mean what you say. This way, children feel like they can count on you.

I always joke with foster parents, don't promise you're having spaghetti for dinner if you don't have noodles in the house. The same thing goes for anything else you say. So if you're going to go to the movies on a Saturday night, make sure that's a plan that you can keep.

April Dinwoodie: That's so, so, so important. All of these things. Can you share how some of this might play out in real time?

Elizabeth Richm...: Sure. In our household, when we are unsure of our ability to commit to something, we say something like, "We hope to," or, "We'll try to." That way, the plan sounds a little less definite, and helps to manage the expectations of the child.

We are also very careful not to talk about doing things until we have thought through whether it's something that we are sure we can do. When you're unable to follow through with something, it actually sends a message to a child that you're untrustworthy. So if you are unable to keep your word about going to the movies, a child's going to think, "Are you really able to keep me safe?"

Finally, I think it's really important for parents, who are fostering and adopting, to remember that children are coming from environments that probably are very different than yours. Your rules may seem odd to them. So gradually adding rules that are easy for them to follow, help keep children safe and connected.

April Dinwoodie: Thank you so much for all of that. So what are some tools that you have used in the past, to help create consistency in your everyday lives?

Elizabeth Richm...: In our household, we have a big whiteboard by our back hallway, where the kids hang their coats. On this whiteboard, we have a calendar that talks about what's going on this week and next week. So kids know what's happening currently, and can predict what's going to happen soon. Each child places their school work and permission slips on the clips, on this board. This board also contains household rules, and a place where kids can write down things that they want to talk to us about.

We've found this a great way to help children communicate with us. It allows them to visually see what's going on in our house, to be able to prepare for transitions. We also do a lot of reminders in our household, for activities. So for example, we might say, "In an hour, we'll be leaving. In an hour, we'll be doing this activity." Then we count down things like, in 30 minutes, in 10 minutes, in 5 minutes.

April Dinwoodie: These are great ideas, Elizabeth. Before we dig a little deeper, can you give us some ideas on how to help children feel comfortable when they first move into your home?

Elizabeth Richm...: Sure, April. You may be meeting a child at the agency, or the child could be dropped off at your house by the case worker. We try to greet them, and if they're small, we try to get down to their level. Maybe even make slow eye contact, and remember that you're probably very excited that the child is here, but they may not be excited. So know that they may come with many different feelings, including fear, worry, sadness, and anger.

Here's some tips that we've used in the past: if a case worker is dropping a child off to your house, make sure you have a snack, and some water, and juice ready for them right away. If you are picking the child up from the agency, I always like to pick a restaurant that I know they're familiar with, so they can order food that they're familiar with, and they're comfortable with.

Another nice thing I like to do is while we're sitting, having that snack, I like to make a grocery list. And if my other children are around, I have them add things that they want on the groceries list, and then I ask the new child what they like. That way they have a sense that they're able to add things to the list, and that they'll have food that they like.

If we haven't had dinner yet, I let them pick out what we're going to have for dinner that night. Again, it allows them to have options, and make choices. It shows them that they're going to have food in the house that they like, and they get to start making decisions.

When we get home at night, I try to be careful to make sure that our enthusiasm stays measured, so they are not overwhelmed. As far as bedtime routines go, especially that first night, we generally have a linen closet full of different colored sheets, and Disney characters, and comforters. So the child can choose out what they want on their bed. This again, allows the child to begin to feel like they have a sense of control, and that their bed is their bed, in a safe place.

It's important not to overwhelm children in the beginning. They need time to settle into your home and feel comfortable. Smothering them with affection, or peppering them with lots of questions is not a great tactic. Likewise, I usually try not to provide them with a long list of rules and expectations. I may pick a few things that are really important, and start there.

April Dinwoodie: Now that makes a lot of sense. And what are some ways to help children feel emotionally and physically safe, during their transition into your home?

Elizabeth Richm...: When we have new children in our home, it's hard to know what makes them feel safe or unsafe. You cannot know for sure the things that may trigger their feelings of being scared, or a trauma memory. We always try to start really slow, by keeping our expectations and rules simple, with new children. We try to ask questions, and find out in a non-threatening way, to gather information about a child's past, and their preferences.

As parents, I think it's easy to know that most children are afraid of thunderstorms or lightning, but for children who you do not know the history of, it's hard to know what makes them feel comfortable, or uncomfortable. We try to ask children a lot, along the way. Do you feel safe? Do you like doing this? Is this something new to you? Or simple questions like, "Do you like the light on or off, at nighttime?" These types of questions help you get to know the child, and provide a greater emotional safety for them.

I think it's important to remember that just because something feels safe to you and your house, it doesn't mean that it feels safe to a new child, that hasn't had the similar experiences to you. For older children, it's critical to ensure that they have a sense of privacy, and know the boundaries in the home that keep them safe. Depending on their past experiences, it may be important for them to hear that this is something that they can expect to feel safe.

April Dinwoodie: Thanks, Elizabeth. Can you give us an example?

Elizabeth Richm...: Yeah. I think for kids, and especially teenagers in your home, just something simple, like we have a sign that hangs in our hallway where the bedrooms are, that says, "You are safe. I'm safe. We're all safe." A really simple concept that you think, but for kids that haven't been safe, it really begins to set the stage of what they can expect from you, in this household. And also say with older children, it's especially important that if you're wanting to give them a hug, or a pat on the back, that this is something that you're asking permission to do, ahead of time.

April Dinwoodie: All that is so important. And the simple things do matter. A little goes a long way. So are there some things that a parent who is fostering or adopting can do, as a child settles into their home?

Elizabeth Richm...: Yeah. After a few days in your home, you'll begin to tell when a child is feeling overwhelmed. You can usually tell because they become withdrawn, or they become uncomfortable, and sometimes they complain. You'll hear stomach aches, and aches in their legs, and those kinds of things. And so I think it's important to know that they are being successful in your household, that they are having opportunities to participate, and become part of your home, and your routines. And it gives them an opportunity to focus on other activities, maybe than the feelings that they're having in the pit of their stomachs.

One example that I think is really helpful is just simple things, like asking a child to help set the table with you. I'll do the spoons, you do the forks, type of thing. Or you can sit together and play on the floor, or help clean up and put blocks back in a block container. Looking for ways that you can simply connect with a child, with them having success in completing something. You're building success for them, in a shared and connected kind of way.

It's also important for parents who are fostering and adopting to observe the children, and become acquainted with the situations that might be most difficult for them, or times of the day that are harder for them. As you become more aware of this, you'll be able to help to manage the environment, so that it feels more safe, and more stable for the child. My husband and I always take notes, and observe when we first have children in our home, so that we can begin to see if there are patterns of behavior. We'll talk a little bit at the end of the day, and compare what we've observed, so that we can try and help figure ways to help children calm themselves.

April Dinwoodie: I think this is all really great, and these practical tools are so important. So what are some other ways to create a sense of safety and security?

Elizabeth Richm...: Coming into a new home, new people can be overwhelming, with a number of new names. And so, a fun little board that we have has the names of the people and the animals in our house, with a picture, and then their name next to that as a reminder. I always make sure to leave notes on the child's bedroom, including like a picture of myself, and my name is Elizabeth, or my husband. And

it says, my name is Tom. So that kids can remember who you are, and how to call for you.

One solution we found helping kids safe and provide them with personal space, is we have each child have their own sleeping bag. And that way we're able to either do bedtime stories, or Saturday morning cartoons, or movie nights with everyone feeling cozy and safe, but making sure that they know that they're in their own personal safe, and that nobody will be touching them.

April Dinwoodie: It's so important in creating this safety. It seems like bedtime might be an important thing to focus on. What are some of your thoughts and strategies here?

Elizabeth Richm...: Yes. One thing I think that we really wanted to figure out is how to help children feel safe around bedtime routines. Typically, we think of bedtime routines as stories, and most people read children's stories in their kids' rooms, in their kids' beds. But for kids who have had adults in their bedroom, when that wasn't safe, or that was a scary time for them, this can be a time where that actually triggers a behavior.

So we always do bedtime stories downstairs, on the couch. Again, utilizing those sleeping bags, everybody has kind of their own space, or we have a couch, and we always joke that everybody gets one child to one couch cushion. And that way, everybody has their own personal space.

We always try to plan ahead for bedtimes, when kids are new to us. During the day, I might say, "Do you want to pick out some stuff to animals to have on your bed?" I also prep them. "After we get cleaned up. We'll have a story, down here in the living room, and then one of us will come up to your room. I can come into your room, or you can go into your room yourself, and get yourself into bed. I can tuck you in." Again, allowing that child to have choices about how they allow you to interact with them, and how comfortable they feel in that routine, and how to keep themselves safe.

April Dinwoodie: Anything else you would suggest about nighttime, in general?

Elizabeth Richm...: Keeping the lights, on or TV on, when children are used to them is very important. Simple things that can make a child feel less scared. It's hard to know what triggers are for an individual child in your home. So being observant is really important.

No matter what the age of the child is, we leave nightlights on all over the house. Some of them eventually turn them off on their own, but in the meantime, we leave them on. We make sure that it's automatically comes on, when the level of darkness is there. So it's not something you have to remember to turn on. And again, it allows the children to feel safe, I believe.

If children need you in the middle of the night, it's important that they know how best to engage with you. So, for some of you, you might have a rule that they have to knock, or maybe they call out from their room. If your door is shut, do they knock and come in? Whatever it is that works for your household, make sure you explain this to a child, before they go to bed, so they know how to get ahold of you in the middle of the night, if they need something.

April Dinwoodie: Yeah, that's so smart and strategic. Elizabeth, I loved your example earlier about one person per couch cushion. What are some other things that you could have us think about, related to safety and personal space?

Elizabeth Richm...: When it comes to talking about personal space with children, we use the words, "a personal bubble," which each of us define as a hula hoop size space around you. We set this boundary with all of our children, and if you want to come into someone's bubble, you literally have to ask, "May I come in your space?" or, "May I come in your bubble?" It's been funny to watch, as kids have stayed in our house, how they continue to use that language, even out in public places, because it gives them a sense of safety and security.

When you begin to think about maybe touching a child on the back to say congratulations, or holding a child's hand, or giving them a hug, depending on their age, I think it's really important that you're asking permission. You don't always know a child's complete history of physical abuse, or sexual abuse. And so it's important that they understand that it's their body. They get to decide who touches it, and they have to be asked permission to be touched.

April Dinwoodie: Absolutely. All such practical ideas, Elizabeth. But let's reinforce why it's so important to create these routines and rules, around meal times, bed times, homework time, and screen time. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Elizabeth Richm...: For children that come to your home for foster care, it's important to have routines and rules, because they provide structure, and structure helps children feel safe, because they know what to expect, and what is expected of them. It's also possible that they haven't had predictable, and established routines and rituals around meal times, bed times and homework. So it's your job to help children begin to understand those simple routines that are so important.

When children can predict what will happen, it helps them feel safe, and it allows them to settle into your home. It's also important to keep your rules simple, so that it's easy to remember, and easy for everyone to be consistent and following. If you can predict the rules, and predict consistency, it teaches children that they can count on you.

April Dinwoodie: Now what about bath time, more specifically? This can be very sensitive for children. Can you tell us some of your strategies, and thinking on this?

Elizabeth Richm...: Sure, April. We try to make bath time as simple as possible for children that are new to our home. Most kids are not generally excited about getting into a bath the very first night, in a new home, with strangers. We give children the opportunity to either take a bath or a shower, or we even let children take a sponge bath, or wash cloth bath, in the sink.

Sure. It makes a huge mess. But if that's what makes a child feel comfortable, I think it's really important that they feel safe and secure that first night. I also talk with children about being comfortable about getting dressed in a bathroom, or a bedroom, by themselves. So they have the choice to say whether they need help or not.

In our home bath time is at nighttime. However, for some children, daylight is connected to a sense of safety. And so sometimes you may have to change your family routines, and children need bathe in the morning, because they feel more comfortable, even if it's not the easiest thing to accommodate in your life. It is, when you remember it's important to them.

April Dinwoodie: How do you know when you need to adjust expectations and routines to a child's developmental age?

Elizabeth Richm...: It's important to remember that children's chronological age is not necessarily the same as their developmental age. A child may be 13 years of age, but socially and emotionally may behave much younger. It is particularly true during times of stress in being overwhelmed, or when a child is triggered by a trauma history, that you'll see regression.

When children first come into our homes, we try to gauge the child's competencies, and their abilities, and so we can set up expectations that they're able to achieve, and that actually match their developmental age, much more so than their chronological age.

April Dinwoodie: Elizabeth, earlier you mentioned stopping at a familiar restaurant for food, and I'd like to hear your thoughts on food, and how it plays into feelings of security in nurturing, and safety.

Elizabeth Richm...: Children who have experienced food scarcity, or not known when they were going to eat next can experience significant anxiety about food. Helping children learn that mealtime, and their access to food, is predictable and can be counted on, will help alleviate that uncertainty associated with food and mealtime, and that sort of anxiety and stress that they have.

We've found that it's very helpful to have a drawer where things like granola bars and crackers are always available for them, to eat anytime of the day. This is introduced when a child is first in your home, so they know that it's something that's available for them. We also turn one of our refrigerator drawers into the same kind of concepts. So again, yogurts, Go-gurts, vegetables, fruit sticks,

cheese sticks. Again, things that they can eat anytime of the day, so that they know that they always have access to food, and they don't have to have a worry about that.

When children first come in, you'll find that they eat a lot from those drawers, and maybe are less likely to eat dinner foods. And again, it's something that works its way out, as they begin to believe and know that they can trust that you'll have meals. They'll snack a lot less. But that's again, one of those things that I wouldn't worry a lot about, in the beginning of a placement. Making children aware that they can eat, and that they can feel like they have control over what's going on, and satisfy their hunger, again, begins to give them a sense of safety. It's also important to ask children what they like to eat, and to incorporate that into your meals, so that it feels like their opinion, and their likes and dislikes are worthy.

April Dinwoodie: Absolutely. Any other tips you'd like to share before we close?

Elizabeth Richm...: One thing I've always done is brought every child that comes into our home this big plastic tote. We write their names on it with permanent marker. We let them decorate it with permanent markers, so that they know it's their tote, that they can collect their special things, whatever those are, in this carrying tote. And that tote will always go with them, no matter where they go. Again, we might start off with a couple toys in it. If they get toys at a visit, or present from their parent, they could keep that in it. They might have drawings or school projects. Any of those kinds of things that are there, as they know that this is their tote box, and that no one else is allowed in it.

It's also a nice place to begin to think about life book activities for children, and allowing children to begin to document their life, and their experiences in their own way. We also take pictures. As soon as children come into our home, we ask for pictures at visits when we're with parents, and if they don't have pictures, we offer to take pictures on our cell phone. And then we make sure that very next visit, we're giving parents back pictures of themselves. And that also gives us an opportunity for the child to have a picture of themselves, and their parents.

And then we ask where they want it. Do you want it in a frame on your dresser? Do you want it in your drawer? Do you want it in your tote? How would you like to be able to remember your parents, and what makes that a comfortable environment for you?

April Dinwoodie: So thoughtful, Elizabeth. And it's been such a thoughtful and informative conversation. I want to thank you so much. And you've been a really, really wonderful guest for this podcast.

Elizabeth Richm...: Thanks, April, for the opportunity. I really enjoyed this time together.

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