



IT TAKES AN

Ohana

Supporting foster and adoptive families since 1971

E PŪLAMA NĀ KEIKI

“Cherish the Children”

Spring 2010

Volume 15, Issue 1

Why Do We Need to Tell Our Children the Truth about Adoption?

by Jayne Schooler

Jason sat shell-shocked on the playground swings. His teacher had already blown the whistle to end recess, but he couldn't move. Just moments earlier, two of his peers approached him,

“Hey, Jason,” they said. “What does it feel like to be adopted?”

“I don't know what you are talking about,” Jason snapped back.

“Ask your mom,” one of the boys sarcastically responded. “My mom told me you are adopted and your parents just didn't want you.”

The truth is that Jason was adopted as an infant, but his parents made a decision early on that it would be best to never tell him. The problem with that decision is that too many people knew his story. Their desire to shield him from what they perceive to be painful truth was broadsided by accidental/intentional disclosure at the hands of an uncaring peer.

For such reasons as the trauma that happened to Jason, it is important that adoptive parents not only tell their children that they are adopted, but also be able to share the entire story with them, age appropriately.

Here are five principles for telling the truth.

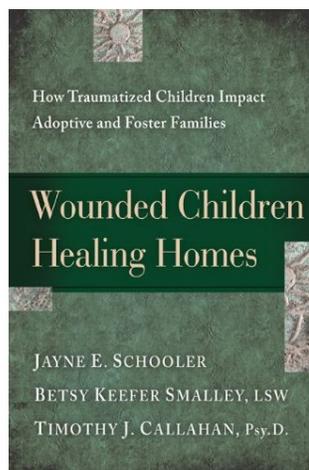
1. **Be willing to initiate conversation** – Often parents say, “I will wait until my child asks me a question.” It is not the child's job to ask, it is the parents' job to tell.
2. **Never lie!** Telling the child's story to him incrementally as he grows older is fine. One way to damage trust is to lie and have to recant it.
3. **Tell information in a developmentally appropriate way.** Share all information by the time the child is 12 (developmentally). It is suggested not to share difficult history with a small child, but as a child grows older, more details can be shared. Age 12 is a

good age for discussing difficult issues and also, the later a parent waits, the more potential for accidental disclosure.

4. **If information is negative, use third party to relate details.** Parents may not feel qualified to share the child's story. Ask a professional to be present for the telling.
5. **Remember the child probably knows more than you think he does.** One thing we often forget – who was there when the abuse took place? Who was locked in a dark closet for hours while “uncles” visited mom? Children do have traumatic memories, but no one is addressing them. Remember, they were there!

As parents it is our responsibility to fully engage our children in conversations about their past. Our children need answers to the questions that they may be asking or afraid to bring up. It is our responsibility as parents to break the chains of uncertainty, confusion and fear by telling the truth.

*Jayne E. Schooler's passion for more than 20 years has been the training and educating of adoption & foster care professionals & families. She speaks regularly at state and national conferences and is the author of 5 books related to foster care and adoption. **The book she wrote with Betsy Keefer Smalley, “Telling the Truth to Your Foster or Adopted Child”, provides parents with the important knowledge of why adopted & foster children need to know the truth about their past plus gives parents excellent help with the “when” and “how-to” of sharing such sensitive info.***



Wounded Children, Healing Homes, Jayne's latest book, offers validation & solutions for the challenges that arise when parenting traumatized or emotionally disturbed children. Read an excerpt regarding Mother's Day co-author Timothy Callahan wrote on page 3 of this newsletter. You will want to read and then re-read this book!

Home Visits ~ How two foster mothers helped my daughter and me build a bond.

By Albert Shepherd

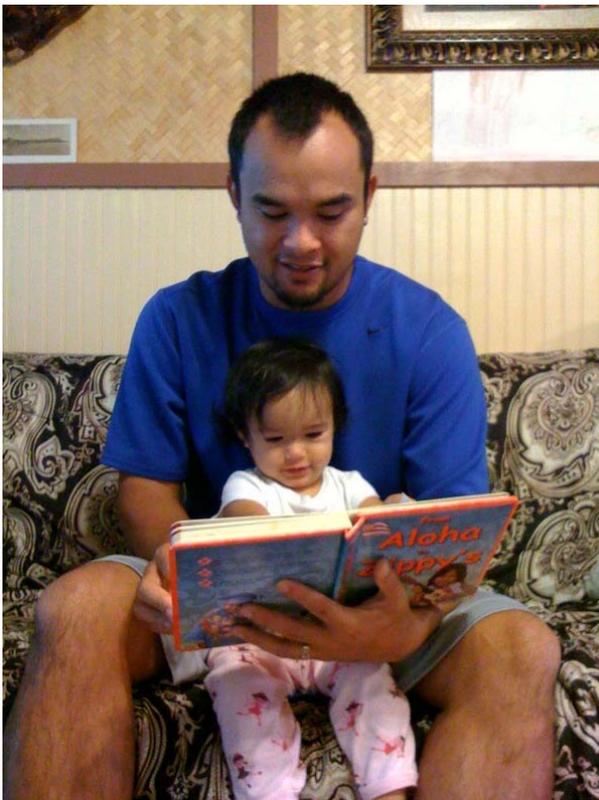
I grew up in foster care, and I know that not all foster parents care about the children. But my daughter had two foster mothers who helped me stay connected to her.

For the first year my daughter was in care, I didn't see her because I was locked up. During my first visit with my daughter, I felt like a father again. Her eyes lit up and I felt she remembered me. I held her in my arms and swung her around, listening to her giggle and laugh. The visit lasted an hour but felt like five minutes.

Beautiful Visits

When I met her foster mother, Mary, I was pleased to see she was a realistic and mature woman who cared about children. Seeing the way she cared for my daughter made me feel relieved and comforted.

Mary also allowed me to visit my daughter at her house after we'd visited at the agency for some time. That was beautiful for us. Mary and I developed a relationship over time like a grandson and grandmother.



Then my daughter was moved from Mary's home, and we had to visit at the agency again, with social workers watching my every move. I thought to myself, "My daughter and I already have a relationship. Why are they concerned about how I spend time with her in a crowded playroom, filled with screaming children and broken toys?"

Building a Bond

Once again, I requested unsupervised visits, which were granted. But the time I got to spend with my daughter was still very short. So I asked to visit my daughter in the foster home one day each weekend. The new foster mother granted my request.

During visits, my daughter and I played with toys and I taught her numbers and letters. I loved watching her learn new things.

Now my daughter is home. I feel blessed that my daughter lived with two foster parents who made it easy for me to stay connected to her.

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It Takes An 'Ohana offers resources and information to those in the community concerned with protecting the interests of children and youth in out-of-home care, while providing responsible advocacy.

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The comments of individual are not necessarily those of ITAO.

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MOTHER'S DAY FOR OUR CHILDREN ~
AN EXCERPT FROM *WOUNDED CHILDREN, HEALING HOMES*

by Timothy J. Callahan, PsyD

Many times an event or critical incident occurs which “triggers” a reaction in an adopted child or the adoptive family. The trigger could be a sound (police or fire sirens), a smell (cigarettes smoke, particular foods cooking, laundry soap), or even changing seasons (anniversaries of past losses). Other critical incidents or triggers may be more predictable, and many can be anticipated. Mother’s Day is one of the more common triggers.

Many adopted & foster children struggle with issues of divided loyalties to birth and adoptive or foster mothers as Mother’s Day approaches. Strategies to “de-fuse” this trigger include:

- ♥ Help the child make a Mother’s Day card for the birth mother. In many cases, the cards can be shared. If contact with the birth mother is not an option, the cards can be kept in a special album.
- ♥ Ensure that the child understands he does not have to stop thinking about or loving the birth mother while in foster care or even after an adoption. The child can love multiple people, including mothers, at the same time. He does not have to choose. In the same way that mothers can love more than one child, children can love more than one mother, all at the same time. Love felt for one person does not diminish love felt for another person.
- ♥ Understand that a child who does not have a conscious memory of a birth mother will still have a strong sense of loyalty to the psychological presence of the birth mother. A bond to an idealized, fantasy birth mother may be even stronger than a relationship with a real person.
- ♥ Support and empathize with the child’s grief for a lost mother. Mother’s Day is a difficult day for any person who has lost a mother figure.



Why Some Kids Get So Upset, What's the Long Term Consequence & What to Do About It!

by Peggy Hill, LCSW

When love between parent & infant falters or fails there's harm not only on a child's heart & soul but also on his or her developing brain. We all know what happens on a gut level. Now there is hard science to explain why.

Allan Shore, Ph.D., says that the infant brain is designed to be molded by the environment it encounters. The first months of an infant's life is a time when events are imprinted in the baby's nervous system. These interactions set up the loop of love, of mother's love through touch, through looking at the baby when the baby looks at the caretaker, & through empathic caring for a baby's needs. Nervous system-wise, the brain develops pathways & neurotransmitters that support the child in learning self soothing. The caretaker's calming ways can change hormone levels, heart function, immunity, & more. It even teaches an infant how to sleep. The infant must be steadied by the physical presence of another to maintain both physical & emotional health.

No caretaker is perfect, & baby's needs are not always met. That's OK, because when the caretaker comes back, holds & soothes the baby, & meets that need, the momentary disruption is repaired & the brain circuitry is made stronger. There's a problem only when caretaking is chaotic, when the caretaker is severely emotionally upset or absent, when the baby is left in misery regularly for long periods of time or when the baby is intentionally & repeatedly hurt. When those things happen, the baby's nervous system becomes chaotic or worse, simply shuts down.

This "shut down" is serious. It sets the child up for sleep disorders, tantrums, conduct problems, emotional overload or shutdown, learning problems &, in

later life, immune system problems, mental problems, especially major depression & post traumatic stress disorder, failed relationships & possibly criminal behavior.

Foster & adoptive parents frequently work with children who haven't developed the brain & chemical connections to self regulate. The picture is grim. Either the young person is all over the place, doesn't sleep & can't study (so easy to say ADHD or conduct disorder), or is rigid & simply doesn't respond. Some prefer TV, music & video games to interactions with others. Some, dangerously, look to nearly anyone for help in regulating emotions.

How can this be repaired?

Fortunately, connections in the brain can grow at any time. Even though infancy is the best time to teach self regulation, the child's home & school environment, interactions with caring adults, & brain exercises create the possibility of new brain development. As caring adults, we can be attuned to the child's emotional state & respond in a caring way. We can set up a positive atmosphere where a child is accepted "just the way he is" while being gently shaped towards more self regulation.

So easy to say; so hard to do when a child sulks, screams, hits, lies, steals, pulls away, runs away, sets fires or makes wild accusations.

Can this really be repaired? Again, connections in the brain can grow at any time. To get started:

- ♥ The caretaker must take care of herself. Respite. Meditation. Stress management. Exercise. Support from others. If the caretaker is broken, the cycle repeats.
- ♥ Find love within yourself for the

child. A parent's love is a continuous shaping force throughout childhood. Maternal responsiveness & close bodily contact lead to the unfolding of self-reliance & self confidence. Warm human contact generates the internal release of quieting neuro-chemicals, making mother's love a powerful force & building new connections in the brain. Even teenagers, who sometimes behave as if they are 'so over' the need for a mother's affection, must be kept in this loop of love.

- ♥ Work with the child. Ensure that the baby or child has a safe, stable & predictable living situation. Teach courteous communication & interpersonal skills – what's done by rote often is internalized.
- ♥ Teach eye contact. Loving facial expressions help with brain development. Teach loving, safe touch if the child can accept it. Holding time is a wonderful technique, but may be overwhelming. Hair brushing, Dad time with tumble sports, reciprocal shoulder massages, manicures & pedicures, foot rubs, or gentle professional massage may help.
- ♥ Medication can help immediate problems. Consult a good psychiatrist who understands children with attachment issues.
- ♥ Manage the home environment so there is lots of play between children & between adults & children. Story time, game time, shared cooking, garden projects all help develop a child's ability to be with others & to self regulate. Avoid "individual" games & sports except when needed for self soothing & "down" time. Electronics tend to be addictive & cut down on interpersonal time so limit TV & video games.

- ♥ Notice the good. Mostly children do more of whatever behavior is noticed, & most parents notice the bad stuff more than the good. Reverse that with your own internal game of “Catch the child being good” & say something positive when you see it. Don’t wait until the child “deserves” it, but make positive comments as much as you can on a daily basis.



Be gentle, specific & predictable in discipline, & make sure the child understands family rules. Remember, a child believes everything that he hears about himself. All children lie & many steal at various times through childhood: The behavior is wrong. However the child is not “a thief” or “a liar”, but someone who made a mistake this particular time for which there are consequences. If lying & stealing become habitual, a therapist may help to get to its roots. Stealing can often be an attempt to get love the person doesn’t feel is deserved; lying often comes from fear of what others will think or do if the truth is told. At the same time, don’t allow a child access to anything that is misused. Teach proper use & remove the object until the child understands & can comply.

Find ways to teach self regulation. Physical exercise the child enjoys can really help. Music lessons, especially voice lessons can help because the breathing techniques taught with voice are prime self soothers. Yoga helps. Brain gym has possibilities. Many religions teach self regulation techniques; your pastor may have great ideas & leadership groups available. Brainwave biofeedback (neurofeedback) is a direct way of teaching self regulation that also helps with many learning issues.

Love is the Way. Bless all of you who take on this responsibility. In many ways, you’re saving the world.

Author Peggy Hill, LCSW, is with the Windward Biofeedback Associates . See box for contact info.

References:

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<www.mothering.com/science-mother-love-science-catching-mothers-wisdom>

Schore, A. N. (NYP). *Relational Trauma and the Developing Right Brain: The Neurobiology of Broken Attachment Bonds, Relational Trauma in Infancy*. Tessa Baradon, Ed. Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self*. WW Norton & Co., Inc, N.Y.

Schore, J. R. & Schore, A. N. (2008). *Modern Attachment Theory: The Central Role of Affect Regulation in Development and Treatment*. *Clinical Soc Work J* 36:9–20. DOI 10.1007/s10615-007-0111-7

Smith, L. B. (2010). *Parenting the Child with Attachment Difficulties*. <<http://www.attachmentdisordermaryland.com/parenting.htm>>

Brain based biofeedback (neurofeedback) is

a learning technique that helps the brain learn to regulate itself. It is a biofeedback technique, meaning that the person training is given moment to moment information about brain functioning and is taught ways to improve that functioning. Once training is completed the person has learned the desired skills permanently. Neurofeedback can quickly teach children with serious self regulation issues ways to quiet themselves. The mom of a child, who was so disruptive he needed 1 on 1 support at a treatment center for extremely disturbed children wrote that after 24 sessions, “Neurofeedback has helped my son gain control over the roller coaster that was his mood and emotions. The huge change & improvement in his quality of life since beginning neurofeedback has made me a believer.” After 12 sessions the boy was moved into a regular public school with 1 on 1 support, and now the extra support is being phased out. For more information, please follow the links below, or call Peggy Hill directly @ 808– 781-3007 for a DVD on the technique.

Links:

www.windwardbiofeedback.net
www.eeginfo.com/research/
www.allanschore.com/articles.php
www.mothering.com/science-mother-love-science-catching-mothers-wisdom

Neurotherapists Available in Hawai`i:

Oahu:

Peggy Hill, LCSW
 Windward Oahu
 808-781-3007
windwardbiofeedback@gmail.com

Amanda Armstrong Ph. D, LCSW
 Honolulu
 808-951-5540

Big Island:

Mark Ansel, LCSW, CSAC
 808-884-5300
 Kamuela & Kapaau
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 808-324-0434
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 808-336-1151
leviegray@yahoo.com

Training & Support Opportunities

Nurture Me & Watch Me Grow: Cultivating Healthy Resource Families

The Statewide Annual Conference 2010 is presented by Family Programs Hawai'i, the Hawai'i State Department of Human Services, the Institute For Family Enrichment & Hui Ho'omalua.

This conference is FREE and designed to develop and enhance the attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to create nurturing families for children and youth to thrive and grow. Barbara & Tom Naki of The Institute for Enrichment will be presenting on how to apply nurturing principles and practices in the parenting process. The conference is interactive and is presented in a shared learning environment with individual, group activities and experiences in applying nurturing principles and practices for resource families.

All conferences run from 9 am to 3 pm EXCEPT Oahu. It is 8:30 am to 2:30 pm.

Hilo: Tuesday, April 6, 2010 at the Hilo Hawaiian Hotel

Kona: Wednesday, April 7, 2010 at the Keahou Beach Resort

Maui: Wednesday, May 5, 2010 at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center

Kauai: Wednesday, May 12, 2010 at the Aloha Beach Hotel

Oahu: Saturday, June 5th, 2010 in the Dole Ballrooms

Find a link to register on-line at www.ittakesanohana.org or contact **Family Program's Warm Line** at: 808-545-1130 or toll free from neighbor islands at 1-866-545-0882.

O'AHU FOSTER FAMILY APPRECIATION DINNER & FOSTER YOUTH TALENT CELEBRATION

Share your talent! Event to showcase the talent of youth in foster care.



COME FOR DINNER, PRIZES & FUN

Location: Planet Hollywood
2155 Kalakaua Ave., Honolulu

Date: Sunday, May 2

Time: 3:00 pm – 6:00 pm

3:00 pm ~ Family Fun & Games

3:30 pm ~ Early Dinner

4:30 pm ~ 6:00 pm ~ Talent Show

Free

Free Family Appreciation Dinner will be served for Resource Families.

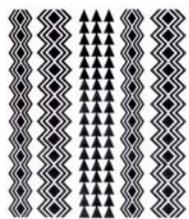
(\$10.00 per person for Service Providers.)

To Register Your Talent and/or RSVP:

Call the Family Programs Hawai'i Warm Line at 545-1130.

This is a Foster Care Training Committee (FCTC) event which includes representatives from Catholic Charities Hawai'i, Child & Family Service, Department of Human Services, EPIC 'Ohana Conferencing, Family Programs Hawai'i, Hale Kipa, It Takes An 'Ohana, Hawai'i Foster, Heart Gallery Hawaii, HOPE INC, Inc, Kokua Ohana & Partners in Development Foundation.

2010 National Foster Care Appreciation Month Events



East Hawai'i:

Thursday, May 6-Sign Waving for National Foster Care Month:
4:00 - 5:00 pm Kamehameha Ave. on the Bay Front Soccer Field Area

Maui: Pili Na Huewai ~ "Bringing our `Ohana into Balance"

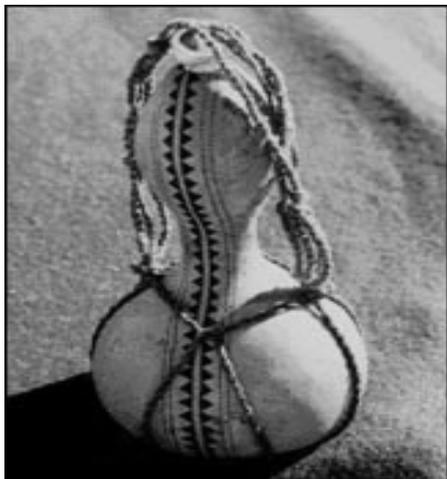
This event is sponsored by the Neighborhood Place of Wailuku with assistance from the Hānai Coalition, Friends of the Children's Justice Center, Keiki Kōkua, Family Programs Hawaii, The Office of Hawaiian Affairs & the Department of Human Services, Maui Child Welfare Services.

Main Event:

Saturday, May 22, 2010, 10:00 am to 3:00 pm
Location: Ka'ehu Bay, 600 Kūkona Place
(From Sack-n-Save, head toward Waihee and take the 2nd. right after bridge)
Registration: 9:30 am to 10:00 am

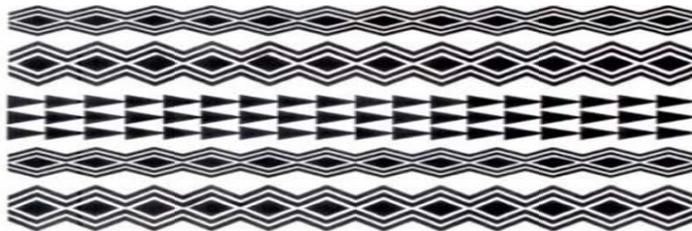
Preparation of Imu : Friday, May 21, 2010

**Calling all Maui Foster,
Adopt, Guardian & Kinship
`Ohana for Food! Games!
Prizes! Entertainment! Fun!
& much more!**



Call today to let us know what you would like to help with. Do you dance the hula or maybe make lei? I'm sure a lot of you have a special talent you want to share with others.

Please call Lisa at 243-5164.



**THIS IS A TIME TO THANK ALL WHO
WORK TO HELP HAWAI`I'S KEIKI ~
MAHALO FOR THE PART YOU PLAY!**



Providing Educational Stability to Children in Foster Care

By Erica Jeung Dickey & Victor Geminiani

Remaining in their home schools offers one form of critical stability for children in foster care by allowing them contact with respected teachers, friends & confidants. In addition to providing stability for important relationships, staying in their home schools can also reduce the risk that children will experience a significant lapse in their educational development. Studies show that changing schools during the school year can cause educational setbacks of 5 months or more. Indeed, Hawai'i courts recognized the importance of education stability when it ruled that Hawai'i needed to comply with federal McKinney-Vento Act & keep homeless children in their original schools.

Recognizing the importance of educational stability for foster children, the Federal and Hawai'i legislatures have enacted laws protecting a child's right to remain in his or her original school during initial & subsequent placements in foster care. Hawai'i's Guiding Principles for Foster Children, Hawai'i Revised Statutes Sec. 587-3, contains protections directed at ensuring educational stability for foster children. Specifically, the Guiding Principles require the Hawai'i Department of Human Services (DHS) ensure that foster children, if they move during a school year, have the right to complete the school year at the same school they were in prior to any move.

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCSIAA), effective October 2008, has more specific requirements for the DHS and Department of Education (DOE). First, the Act requires

a case plan for each child placed in foster care include assurances that the proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement is a factor in placement. If placement within the school district is not possible, the FCSIAA also requires that the DHS coordinate with the DOE to keep foster children in their original schools unless it is not in the child's best interests. (DHS reimburses travel costs to the resource parents for transporting the child to remain in his or her home school. See box below.)



Currently, resource caregivers, formerly referred to as foster parents, can request and apply for geographic exceptions for foster children who have been or will be removed from their original schools as a result of foster care placement. Thus, even if the child has already transferred schools & is facing difficulties there, a resource caregiver may still request a geographic exception to return the child

to his or her home school. In general, resource caregivers should submit the request for the geographic exception & the transportation cost reimbursement to their caseworkers.

If you are interested in learning more about educational stability, have a child who is negatively affected by a mid-year school transfer, or would like more information about sharing your experiences during the public hearing for the new rules, please call Lawyers for Equal Justice at 587-7605 and ask for Victor or Erica. Lawyers for Equal Justice is a nonprofit legal aid program. Learn more at www.lejhawaii.org.

Reimbursement to DHS Resource Caregivers for Mileage and School Expenses

Resource caregivers can receive actual car mileage reimbursement for transportation to and from school or various school activities at the current state rate of \$.50 cents per mile. Provide the following to the social worker when submitting your request: name of child, date of transportation, reason for trip, origin & destination, and total mileage for that trip. Be sure to include your name and date on the form. Also, write legibly. To insure timely reimbursement, it is a good idea to submit your requests on a monthly basis. And remember to always keep a copy for your files.

If your foster child catches the city bus to and from school and if free public transportation is not available (i.e. school bus), DHS will reimburse for the cost of a bus pass for months school is in session. Submit the receipt to the child's social worker for reimbursement (keep a copy for your files).

Resource caregivers may also submit for mileage reimbursement for attendance at school meetings such as PTA, Open House, IEP or parent/teacher meetings.

Finding Solutions With Mediation

by Elizabeth Kent

Sometimes we all can use some outside help to resolve conflicts. Becoming involved in mediation is one way to get a helping hand.

What is mediation? Mediation is an informal, private process that helps people talk about their problems and find solutions. A mediator—an impartial person—guides the discussion process, sometimes with each person talking with the mediator separately. The mediator does not make any decisions for the people involved and the result of the mediation is up to them. Mediation is not like the legal or administrative hearings systems, where someone else (a judge) makes the decision.

Mediation is used in many different situations involving family disputes, landlord/tenant matters, divorce cases, and other topics. Restoring and preserving relationships is important in family matters because the people involved often have to be with or communicate with each other even after their disagreement is solved. Agreement about how to interact with each other in the future can help prevent the misunderstandings that get in the way of effective communication.

There are community mediation centers on most islands. The community mediation centers listed below are familiar with family matters and charge affordable fees. If you would like more information, please call the Center closest to you or visit the Center at www.courts.state.hi.us/cadr. The Center is part of the Hawaii Judiciary.



KAUA'I
Kaua'i Economic Opportunity, Inc.
Mediation Program
Telephone: (808) 245-4077

MOLOKA'I
Mediation Center of Moloka'i
Telephone: (808) 553-3844

O'AHU
The Mediation Center of the Pacific
Telephone: (808) 521-6767
www.mediatehawaii.org

MAUI
Mediation Services of Maui
Telephone: (808) 244-5744
www.mauimediation.org

HAWAI'I
Ku'ikahi Mediation Center
Telephone: (808) 935-7844

WEST HAWAI'I MEDIATION CENTER
Telephone: (808) 885-5525
www.whmediationcenter.org

When asked what part of this mediation program you found most valuable or helpful, parents involved in the mediation program have said:

- *Helped me express my feelings and concerns.*
- *We got the problem straight and learned how to take things seriously.*
- *I thought that there was only one option for me to take. After talking with the mediator, I was able to suggest one more option for the GAL and DHS to consider.*
- *All parties were present and took turns speaking kindly/respectfully. All options were explored.*

Health Care Reform Law Expands Adoption Tax Credit

Public Law 111-148, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, was signed into law on March 23, 2010. Section 10909 of the Act extended the adoption tax credit for one more year (to December 31, 2011) and expanded the program in two ways:

For tax year 2010, the amount of the credit was increased from \$12,170 to \$13,170. The credit was made refundable for all types of adoption for tax years 2010 and 2011.

Because the adoption tax credit will be refundable, families who have smaller tax liability will now be able to benefit from the credit for adoptions finalized in 2010 and 2011.

The IRS has not yet released any guidance on the change. The North American Council for Adoptable Children (NACAC) will update its tax credit fact sheet later this spring and we will provide a link to that information on our website at www.ittakesanohana.org.

Mahalo to Our Supporters!

Foundations:

Foodland Charitable Fund
Hawaii Court Improvement Program
The Office of Hawaiian Affairs
Western Union

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Susan Szabo
Cathy Troy

THE STORY BEHIND OUR LOGO

In 1996, foster parent Cid Newsome created our logo. Cid always liked Hawai`ian quilts & thinks of them as a natural representation of family. She chose to use the hibiscus in the design because it is the state flower. Instead of the traditional leaves, Cid created a design featuring two boys & two girls. She says, "I chose to include children in the design because foster parents are taking care of the children of Hawai`i. In a way, we are "quilting" them into our family. Foster children become an integral part of our family & the quilt design represents the ability to take pieces (different people) & patch them together to make a whole. Children and flowers are both represented in Hawai`ian by the word "pua".



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Purchases made at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) through links from our website result in a portion of your total [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) purchase being given to us. These funds are used to support our publications, e-alerts and website. ITAO only receives this money if you shop through one of the links on www.ittakesanohana.org. *Thank you for remembering us when you place your next Amazon order!*

Other ways you can help:

- ◆ Become a foster parent, now referred to as "resource caregiver" by DHS, by contacting Hui Ho`omalulu at 441-1117 or toll free from the neighbor islands at 1-888-879-8970.
- ◆ Support legislation for a quality foster care system.
- ◆ Volunteer your time in a program such as Family Programs Hawaii's *Project Visitation*.
- ◆ Hire a former foster youth & mentor them.
- ◆ Rent to a former foster youth & mentor them.
- ◆ Become a Volunteer Guardian Ad Litem (VGAL) by contacting Ken Bailey at

Building a Bridge

by Denise Goodman

Strengthening connections between parents and foster parents.

Denise Goodman, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative, works with public and private child welfare agencies nationwide to support parents and foster parents in working collaboratively.

Q: What are the benefits of positive connections between parents and foster parents?

A: I've seen that when parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly and stay home. Kids in foster care also get better care when the parent and foster parent exchange information about the child and work together to make visits positive. Kids also feel less worried about their families. Many kids are worried about loyalty—if they like the foster parent, does that mean they can't like their parent anymore? They feel better if they see the foster parent and parent getting along.

Reunification is also easier for the child if the relationship with the foster parent doesn't end, even if contact with the foster parent is just a birthday or Christmas card, a phone call, or occasional stopping by. The foster parent can become an ongoing support to the parent after reunification, someone who is an expert about their child. When things are tough and the kid is acting goofy, the parent can call and say, "What do I do?" Foster parent is able to say, "This worked for me." That can help prevent the child from re-entering foster care.

For the social worker, it can make a case easier if the parents and foster parents click. Being a social worker can be a grueling, difficult job, with everybody making demands and neither parent wanting you in their lives. Good relationships are booster shots that keep you going.

Q: What are the challenges of building positive connections?

A: Lot of times when you say to families and staff, "We want the foster parents to work with the parents," they freak out. They have a lot of fears.

The care giving family may be concerned that they won't be able to keep the child safe. They worry that the parent will show up uninvited, or will be jealous or upset that their child is not at home. They worry that they won't get along because they don't have the same parenting style.

Parents have their own fears and stereotypes. They are worried that the foster parent will look down on them or that their child will like the foster parent better than them. Sometimes it's even harder to get along when it's a kinship placement, because of family politics.

I find it's a harder sell for staff than for families, though. Staff are concerned that they'll have more problems to deal with. It's true that it's not always perfect dealing with real people's concerns and fears. But the reality is that many caregivers and parents are already doing this behind the agency's back. They live in the same neighborhood and run into each other at Wal-Mart or at court and work through the awkwardness on their own.

Q: How can parents and foster parents build connections?

A: I talk about a concept I call "the bridge"—you can agree together about where you need to be on that bridge and move forward in baby steps to cross it. You don't have to start with face-to-face meetings. There are a lot of ways to have contact: exchanging notes about the child, talking on the phone, or attending school meetings or doctor visits where the parent can provide useful information about the child.

When you both naturally feel ready to move to the next level, you can begin meeting in neutral territory. Once you get past the awkwardness and everyone feels comfortable, the foster parent can take the child to the parent's home for visits, or let the parent come to her home. These steps are case-by-case, moment-to-moment decisions made in partnership with the social worker, parent and foster parent.

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Q: *How can the child welfare agency help?*

A: The system has to value the relationship. Staff and caregivers have to be trained to understand, “This is our practice and expectation.” It helps if foster parent recruitment makes the expectation clear. If you have a recruitment campaign that basically says, “Rescue children from their abusive parents,” you’re going to have a harder time than if it says, “Help children and their families.”

It also helps if you have strong parent advocacy and parent advocates, so that parents are supported in being active participants in their lives and cases, not just told, “Here’s your case plan, just do it.”

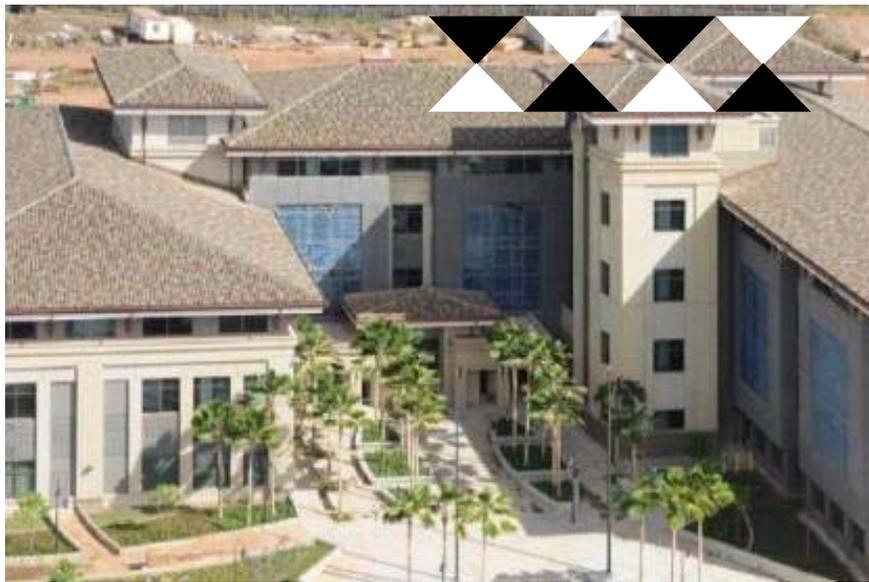
You need structures in place, like an “icebreaker” meeting soon after placement where the parent and fos

ter parent meet and talk about what the foster parent needs to know to take good care of the child. The foster parent can ask about the child’s favorite foods or activities. The foster parent may say, “Johnny keeps asking me why he’s in foster care. How can we handle that?”

Parents and foster parents can talk about how to have good visits. Would the parent like to bring the child a snack? Would the parent like to do the child’s hair? Can they talk before the visit so that the parent can ask about the child’s activities, like, “I heard you went to the zoo. Tell me about that.” They can discuss how to end visits in a positive way. The more you can talk and agree up front, the smoother things will go.

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New Location for Oahu's Family Court



Oahu's Family Court is now operating out of the Kapolei Courthouse. All hearings are being held there, not at the downtown Punchbowl Street facility! The courthouse is located at 4675 Kapolei Parkway (do not Google this address--at this time it shows up incorrectly on their map). The easiest way to get there from Honolulu is to take Exit 1 off of the H-1 freeway (just past the Makakilo/Kapolei off ramp) so as to bypass the Kapolei business district & miss possible heavy traffic.

The courthouse is directly across the street from Costco. Parking is 100% metered, so make sure you bring lots of quarters. And because the Detention Home and Waianae District Court are also there and in operation, parking can get rather tight. Please be patient as the bugs are worked out. Get there early because they only have one entrance & the line can get long.

It Takes An `Ohana sends a big MAHALO to Malcolm Hong, Esq., for these great directions and tips!

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