

# Volunteer Family Coach Summary

## *Brief Description of Safe Families*

**Safe Families for Children hosts vulnerable children and creates extended family-like supports for desperate families through a community of compassionate volunteers motivated by their faith to keep children safe and ultimately together with their families.**

## *What does a Family Coach do?*

There are four general roles a family coach has. In some situations, the volunteer coach may primarily do the first 2 roles.

- 1) Supports the host family – The host family is the key to providing a safe and secure environment for the children as well as developing and positive relationship with the placement parent. The family coach is there to ensure the host family is supported and getting the resources they need.
- 2) Monitors the safety and care of the child - The most important responsibility is monitoring kids that are currently in a host family home. This occurs 48 hours after the child starts with the host family and every week for at least a month. After a month, visits may be reduced to every other week. It's important for the family coach to make sure the child is adapting well to the home and the child is being well cared for.
- 3) Provides resources to the placing parent to help them get back on their feet - This may include making referrals and helping the parent get to any necessary appointments by making sure they know how to get there, etc. If there is another case worker involved, they will certainly take the lead here.
- 4) Facilitates the relationship between the host and placing parent – The Family Coach is key to facilitating the relationship between the host and placing parent. The coach may need to address misunderstandings or miscommunications.

## *Important Thoughts to Remember*

- The call to volunteerism: Although there are specific tasks that need to be accomplished (monitoring kids), successful coaches are less skilled in child welfare skills, therapeutic skills, community referral skills, etc. and more skilled in rallying volunteers to bolster the host family and placing parent. Those child welfare skills aren't bad skills, but an ability and willingness to use and organize an army of amateurs is more important.
- The belief that it is the Body of Christ, acting organically, operating within the scope of its calling which is our most effective life changing intervention of impact. Many of the people who come to us in need are difficult to make impact on. They are well defended against professional, or agenda -driven intervention. Formal engagements (whether staff or coaches), focused on advice giving, goal setting, life style changing, mediating, etc. seem to be rarely successful. The placing parents seem to sniff out an agenda and activate their defenses.
- Calling of the Church: Mentoring, mediating, managing, etc. these skill sets are useful, but the population of placing parents seems to have a limited appetite for them. What seems more useful if understanding that the calling of the Church, which means in part the role of a family coach, to love our neighbor sacrificially with the posture of servant (1st Corith. 13, model of Jesus, etc.) not "one-up", but if anything, "one-down". We want to avoid leading with a stance that placing parents will experience as being parental or paternal, it activates defenses, and they resist us.
- The sublimely beautiful, subversive art of loving children. One of the keys to relationships with difficult people is credibility. We have an amazingly powerful formula for building relationship with these mothers who would never darken the doorway of a Church....sacrificially loving on their children. There is an incredible power and impact that the host families have. They have this kind of magic just through the simple act of hosting their kids. This is why, far and away, it is the host families who make direct life changing impact. They, and what they do, is the vehicle of change. There is no defense for the beauty of the loving act the host family provides and their voices are heard. Many bio moms are pulled down by all of the dysfunctional voices which surround their lives, it wears them down, but when they talk to our host families and spend time in relationship with them, those voices lift them up and they never even know how it happened.

## Supporting the Host Family and Monitoring Children

The following is to be used as a guide for conducting home visits of children placed with Safe Families. There are generally four purposes to the home visit:

1. Ensure the safety and well-being of the child in placement,
2. Support and encourage the parents who are caring for the child,
3. Early identification and problem solving of potential problems that may eventually lead to a placement disruption
4. Encourage and facilitate the relationship between the Safe Family parents and the placing parents.

Home visits include interactions with the child and Safe Family parents but also observations of the home and the child/children.

1. Greetings: Include thanking them for their sacrifice and service to the Lord. During your first visit, share a little about yourself and get to know them.
2. Observations:
  - a. Are there any potential dangers that need to be identified (i.e. pools, wires, exposure to medications and chemicals, etc.)?
  - b. Is the house generally clean and organized?
  - c. Are there any new members to the home that we were not aware of (i.e. other children living there, family members, friends, etc.)?
  - d. Does the child look like they are being well cared for?
  - e. Does the host family seem to have good routines and is the child adapting to them?
3. Questions to ask:
  - a. Is the child/children eating and sleeping well? How are they doing with other routines? Please encourage consistent routines.
  - b. How are they getting along with the parent's own children? Are they adapting well to a new guest?
  - c. Does the child have any health or medical problems? If you know the child has asthma or another condition, please specifically ask about that those conditions.
  - d. If in school, inquire how the child is doing in school academically, behaviorally, and socially.
  - e. Does the Safe Family parent have any concerns about the child's behavior?
  - f. Do they have other supports in place?
  - g. Has the child been talking to the parent on a regular basis?
  - h. The Family Coach should should/can make notes in the data base about their visit.
4. Information about the parent: Take a few minutes and share any updated information you have about the parents. It is important for us to keep the Safe Family parent in the loop. Please go over the placement documents to make sure there aren't additional questions.
5. Ask about their relationship with the placing parent and any contact they have had. We want to do what we can to encourage this relationship and help the Safe Family understand and have empathy towards the placing parent. A three-way call might be helpful to move the relationship along.
6. Before you end, ask whether the Safe Family has any needs or concerns that we need to be aware of. Look for any opportunity to praise them for a job well done. Make sure they have your contact information and that they are welcome to reach out to you. Also give them the family coach supervisor contact information.
7. Make sure they have been connected to their ministry lead for ongoing support from the church. If not, help make that connection for additional support.
8. Talk with them about the child visiting the parent. If the host family can't do, see if a Family Friend or someone else can help.
9. Scripture: Be prepared to share a portion of scripture that might be an encouragement to them.
10. Prayer: Ask if you could close the time in prayer. Make sure you specifically pray for the parent of the children.

11. Make sure you document in the progress notes what occurred during the visit. Also, remind the host family to make notes in the data base.
12. Please consider what other support (respite, child care, pastoral visit) the host family might need.

## **Setting up the first parent-child visit**

Regular visits between the parent and the child are probably the most important issue that the Family coach should address. Visits not only help children with their adjustment but are instrumental in keeping the parent on track to address issues that led to the need for placement. The family coach may need to participate in the initial visit if the host family cannot do them. It's important that visits are done at a convenient location to the parent as they will likely have the most difficulty with transportation. Why are visits important?

- (1) Regular contact with placing parents gives the child several important messages: (1) the child can see that the parents care enough to visit, and the child can see that all the adults – placing parents, Safe Family parents, Family Coach – are working together; (2) children can see for themselves how much progress their parents are making toward getting them home. Research in the child welfare field consistently indicates the regular visits between children and the placing parent is the strongest indicator of family reunification.
- (2) Contact also is helpful for the parents. Just as the child may fantasize about “ideal” parents, the parents may forget how difficult parenting is. Regular contact with their child helps them measure their own ability and commitment to their children's return.
- (3) Contact between children and placing parents helps Safe Families too. It keeps them from becoming overly attached to the child, because they can see that this child and the child's parents belong together. Safe Families, by getting to know the placing parents, can better understand the child's behavior.
- (4) One of the most important benefits is that regular contact helps all the adults – placing parents, Safe Family parents, and Family Coach –practice partnership in assuring permanence for children.

## ***Final Home Visit and Saying Goodbye***

At some point the child will return to his biological parents. Just as the initial transition is difficult so will the return be potentially difficult. These guidelines should help to make it easier on the child:

- Prepare for returning home the first day of placement. The host family should be encouraged to frequently talk about going home, pray for the parent with the child, etc.
- Always be open and honest with child and Safe Family. It's ok to acknowledge to the child that they might have ambivalent feelings. However, it's important for reunification even if ambivalent.
- Have the family plan a good bye party for the child. This can be as simple as a special dinner with the child.

Please make an effort to facilitate the ongoing communication between the parent and host family after children are returned home.

## **Supporting the Placing Parents**

Although parents look for help from Safe Families because of specific reasons such as homelessness, substance abuse, etc., the underlying reason for nearly all placements is social isolation. They lack the necessary support system that many of us naturally have because of family relationships or relationships we build within our church or with neighbors. It's sad to be in a position that you have no one else to turn to other than strangers when things are not going well.

There are a number of reasons why parents might not have a solid support network:

- The parents may lack the necessary social skills to develop and maintain relationships
- The parent's mental health may stand in the way of developing healthy relationships. Depression, bipolar, etc. often have accompanying relational difficulties.

- Many relationships develop because there is a natural give and take. Some placing parents have never learned or don't feel they have anything to give (low self-esteem, self-centeredness), so they only take.
- Many communities that parents come from might not be conducive for mutual social connections, etc.
- Many parents have burned out relationships with family or friends because of their substance abuse history or making numerous promises that they don't follow through with.

Whatever the reason, most parents need caring people who are willing to befriend them. It's these relationships that have a powerful opportunity to prevent child abuse and crises in the future. This is the core of Safe Families, becoming part of the parent's support network. In the Christian world, we call it creating a sense of community. This is what we are experts in and this is what parents need the most. It's an exciting match between the Church's ultimate strength with a parent's greatest challenge. This is why Safe Families is so important.

**Good Enough Parenting** - Our goal is to support the parent to be "good enough for their kids". We support parents through a crisis or period of time when their support or existing resources are inadequate to safely parent their children or care for themselves. Strengthening and supporting the parent's protective factors will help them deal with situations that might be beyond their control. We want the parent to be "good enough." We have to guard against having too high expectations.

**5 Protective Factors** – Research has shown that if parents develop 5 protective factors, they can be "good enough" for their children despite having ongoing challenges. Additional resources are available.

1. Parental resilience- Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma
2. Social connections - Positive relationships others that provide emotional, informational, and spiritual support
3. Knowledge of parenting and child development - Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support the development of their children
4. Concrete support in times of need - Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by unmet needs
5. Social and emotional competence of children - Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships

## Hope

Many parents come to Safe Families not with one single problem, but with multiple problems. Our job is not to fix their problems. Many of the problems have been longstanding and cannot be completely fixed during their time with Safe Families. However, we do have an opportunity to communicate hope. By giving the parent a moment to breath and alleviate the immediate crisis (what do I do with my child), we begin the process of giving the parent hope that their situation can be better. Interactions with the parent should be filled with hope. Although many times, we are hopeful for not specific reason. In Safe Families, we have to communicate hope that is reinforced by tangible action. If a parent can begin to feel a sense of hope, they can leverage the energy, new relations, and skills necessary to get things back on place.

Being Positive: The parent is filled with relationships that are negative. They hear messages from themselves or others that they are a failure. They can't provide for their children, they can't keep a job, they can't, they can't, etc. There might be some truth with the struggles they have. However, they do have the abilities to overcome many of their challenges. That is why we call this position family coach. A coach's job is to inspire, motivate, instruct, and encourage. Good coaches find and build on the athlete's strengths and bring in others that can help improve the athlete's performance. However, the athlete has to do the work. We can motivate, encourage, instruct and inspire the parent. However, they have to do much of the work. We must be good coaches. We must learn how to motivate the parent. We must learn how to help be positive in the midst of multiple problems and negativity. We must learn to help a parent break down

tasks into doable activities. We must bring in the necessary supports to help parents get on their feet. We must be likeable so parents see us as someone they can go to for help and direction.

Ultimately, we realize that many of their challenges need divine intervention. We must be willing to talk with the parent about their spiritual condition and how to improve it, if they want to.

## ***Connecting to the Placing Parent***

### **1. Introducing yourself and building rapport**

- Review the paperwork on the parent before you meet or talk with them. When you talk with the parent, you can fill in some information that is not clear.
- Make sure they have your number and the name and number of the family coach supervisor.
- Make sure you have their number and a back up number in case their phone gets cut off.
- Explain that you want to help make sure visits with their children occur regularly, answer any questions they might have, and help them address the problems that led to them needing Safe Families.
- It would be good for you to tell them a little about yourself, if you feel comfortable with that.
- Make sure they know how to reach the host family.
- Keep in mind the Protective Factors. You can see your Family Coach Supervisor for Strengthening Family's Action Sheets to help build the parents' resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, support, and social-emotional competence of children.

### **2. Identify what needs for them to feel better about getting their kids back.**

During the first call/visit, it's important to be clear what they need to do to get their kids back. This was most likely identified during the initial call. Once that is identified you can talk with them about the steps they need to do for that to be accomplished.

- It's important that you understand the nature of their challenges, how long their problems have been existing, and efforts they have made to try and deal with them. This will help you begin to identify how you and the family coach supervisor may help.
- You also want to get a sense of their openness to receiving additional help. It's possible they may be connected with so many resources that they just need some time for things to start getting some traction.
- Consider what more volunteers can do to help the parent out. Does the parent need a Family Friend for befriending and mentoring? Do they need help with transportation? Are their tangible items they need to adequately care for their children?

Before you hang up, please try and arrange a time for a visit. It's most helpful if the host family can facilitate the visit so they can meet the parent and begin developing the relationship. If not, you might need to facilitate the first visit.

### **3. Facilitating relationship with host parent**

During the first call, you want to begin building the connection with the host family. Take some time to tell the parent more about the host family, the number of children they have, and why they want to help. Please don't make them seem like superstars that might be intimidating to the parent. Your job is to make the connection.

If the parent asks about how they are doing, the parent wants to know that they are generally adjusting well but they miss them. It would be a mistake to say they are doing great and don't ask about their mother at all, even if this is the case. The parent's biggest fear is that they will be replaced by these people who can give and do things for their child that they cannot do. Feel free to talk about the struggles the child has but end with things are moving in a good direction. You also don't want the parent to think they made a mistake because their children are suffering too much. It's a tough balance.

## ***Returning Child Home***

### **1. Helping a parent decide when they are ready and setting the time and date for return home.**

We want to empower the parent to make as many of these decisions as possible. As we talk with the parent weekly, we can make it a habit to talk about progress, length of time the child needs to be with a host family, and target date for return home. In most situations, the return home date is often pushed back because things are not being resolved as quickly as the parent would like. However, they are completely in control, unless there is a child welfare worker that needs to be consulted. The parent identified a number of goals they wanted to accomplish while the child was away from them. Their progress in accomplishing those goals is the driver for the return home date.

### **2. Making sure things are in place for return home**

Once the decision for return home is made, the family coach should begin to make sure the parent is equipped.

- Make sure the parent will continue to be connected with their services.
- Discuss with the parent tangible items they might need when the children are returned home. You can use your network of resources, etc. in order to try and get those items.
- Make sure the kids are connected to the resources they need.

### **3. Identifying potential risks at return home**

We often ask parents to give a couple days notice if they would like their child to be returned prior to the original day established. However, that request is only for convenience of everyone involved. If a parent requests their child to be immediately returned to them, this will occur.

### **4. Encouraging ongoing communication between host and placing parent**

The goal is for the relationship to continue between the two parents. Get a sense from the placing parent what the likelihood of that occurring is. If there are barriers, see what you can do to overcome them.

### **5. Helping a parent reach out for help if things don't go well**

Please make sure the parent knows that they can reach out for help again if things don't go well. They could either call you as the family coach, family coach supervisor, or the host family. It should be considered as a strength if the parent identifies they need help and reaches out. A goal is for parents to be able to self-identify when they are in trouble and have an anchor they can reach out to.