

HANDOUT #1: CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

An essential component of NTDC curriculum is the inclusion of 14 characteristics of successful foster and adoptive parents that were identified through a review of literature, stakeholder interviews, and evaluation of existing curricula. Self-assessment and self-reflection are essential components of the NTDC curriculum. Several characteristics are highlighted in each theme, allowing continued opportunity to think about their importance and to reflect on your parenting characteristics as they relate to each theme. The online self-assessment will provide you with feedback and suggest resources based on your self-rating.

Choosing to reflect on one's own parenting characteristics, knowledge, skills, and abilities begins with a recognition that all parents have areas of strength as well as challenges. This self-assessment is designed to help you identify both strengths and challenges. As you use this self-assessment tool, be honest with yourself and use your self-ratings to identify areas for growth and change. If you already completed the online self-assessment, use the feedback you received to jot down the strengths and challenges you already identified. If you have not yet completed the online self-assessment, you can use the information below to help identify two characteristics that you see as strengths and two characteristics that you see as challenges for yourself.

Identify your top 2 strengths:	Identify your top 2 challenges:
1.	1.
2.	2.

Tolerance for Rejection:

It is not unusual for a child who has been hurt and felt let down or rejected by caretakers in the past to direct their anger and hurt at others who take on a caretaking role. The child who has felt rejection may try to defend against being hurt and feeling rejected again by being the first to "reject," rather than wait on the expected rejection from the parent. Foster and adoptive parents will need to keep the long game in mind. The child will feel less need to reject after they feel increased safety and security in their relationship with you. That said, there is nothing easy about hurtful comments and experiencing rejection, even when we are aware of what is going on. Parents are only human. It is important to remember to get support and validation from others who know how hard the parent is working to best meet the child's needs.



Adaptable/Flexible:

Parents who are adaptable/flexible have the willingness and ability to make changes in parenting style and/or responses to accommodate, encourage, and support children's physical, emotional, and cognitive needs. Parents who are adaptable and flexible are not restricted by stereotypical or societal roles/expectations. Instead, these parents are comfortable acknowledging when something is not working and are open to trying a different approach or modifying their expectations of the children they are parenting. The ability to be adaptable/flexible allows more responsiveness to children's needs.

Have a Sense of Humor:

Parents who have a sense of humor can laugh at themselves and do not take everything too seriously. These parents can use humor to manage the stress of parenting, vent feelings, and deescalate tense situations to build rapport and relationship with a child. It is important for these parents to be mindful to use humor without sarcasm or insults since children who have experienced trauma may not understand the distinction between joking and comments that are uncaring or belittling.

Believe in Self-Efficacy:

Self-efficacy is the feeling of competence and confidence in the ability to effectively parent. Parenting children who have experienced trauma, separation, or loss will sometimes challenge parents to expand their parenting strategies. Parents who believe in self-efficacy acknowledge that they don't know the answer to every problem but are confident that they can resolve problems and issues that inevitably arise.

Realistic:

Parents who are realistic understand that there will be varying degrees of success with different situations and with each child. Realistic parents understand that their efforts may not result in a change in a child's understanding or behavior until much later and they are able to make mistakes, adjustments, and allowances as they re-evaluate expectations. Parents know what their expectations are for the child and can identify when those expectations are not being met and may need to change. They also know that children will make mistakes and that "two steps forward and one step back" is a natural part of growth. Realistic parents help the child understand this too as they celebrate the small steps and see mistakes as learning opportunities.

Trustworthy:

Parents who are trustworthy can create an environment of confidence and safety in their home. Trust is based on understanding the importance of honesty, consistency, routines, and rituals, and then being able to implement these. It requires the ability to be prudent about what is promised to a child, so that the child's expectations are met. Trustworthy parents are careful about their communication so that they consistently prove to the child and the child's birth family that they are reliable.



Attuned:

Being an attuned parent is the ability to be aware of, understand, and be sensitive to the needs of a child at any given time, despite the degree to which the child expresses or does not express their needs with words. Being in tune with moods, level of exhaustion, hunger, rhythms, responses, and needs for physical contact, affection, security, and movement will help the parent respond positively to the child and build trust and a sense of safety. Attunement also requires that the parent stay calm and emotionally regulated so they can help the child regulate their own emotions.

Resilient and Patient:

Parents who are resilient and patient understand their role as helping children achieve success in small steps, beginning with measurable, daily tasks. They don't dwell on past mistakes or the future to pressure themselves, their partners, or the children they parent. These parents notice and celebrate small successes, teaching children to appreciate the accumulative effect of their efforts. Patient and resilient parents have an ability to wait for answers or change without giving up and can withstand "testing behaviors" including hurtful, angry, or rejecting comments and actions. Children with resilient and patient parents have a steady, consistent support as they grow and develop.

Emotionally Supportive/Nurturing:

For children who have experienced separations, loss, and trauma, their behaviors are often tied to a lack of emotional safety as they oftentimes have difficulty feeling calm, safe, and secure. Emotionally supportive and nurturing parents create a sense of safety for the child. Be present for the child by showing up physically and creating a safe place for the child to process and talk. Find quiet times each day to give the child your full attention. Practice your listening and communication skills, avoid interrupting, and be careful not to jump in too much with advice. Your ability to be empathetic, emotionally supportive, and nurturing when children share feelings or memories will help create a sense of felt safety.

Appreciative of Diversity / Other World Views:

Parents who are appreciative of diversity and other world views have an understanding and a sense of respect for children who bring a different set of values with them. For parents, it means having an ability to reconcile that the child's behaviors and values may not align with their own behaviors and values. They accept that this will feel uncomfortable and, at times, may feel wrong as dealing with differences in beliefs and cultural expectations may be challenging. If not resolved, this can be a source of discontent, tension, and conflict. Parents with an appreciation for diversity and other world views show their children and their children's family respect and acceptance.



Committed:

Parenting a child who has a history of loss and trauma contains many challenges. Commitment is the ability to be dedicated to a child, sticking with them no matter how difficult the journey. Parents will need to carefully and consciously consider the requirements of parenting a child and understand that it is not about fulfilling their own parental needs. A parent who is committed recognizes the role may not offer much validation or reinforcement of their skills and talents, but they are determined to engage in the long-term work of unconditional parenting and promoting child well-being. Commitment allows parents to persevere in the face of adversity, knowing that they are doing the right thing.

Empathetic/Compassionate:

Parents who are empathetic and compassionate can perceive or feel others' emotions, particularly disappointment or sadness. It requires that the parent look past the current behavior and find the core distress related to the child's response. Parents who practice empathy and compassion know they cannot shield the child from pain but can allow the child to express the pain and grief they experience. These practices help children identify and process their own emotions and create an environment conducive to healing and change.

Self-Aware/Self-Reflective:

Effectively parenting a child who has experienced loss and trauma will require self-awareness and the ability to self-reflect. We are all impacted by our upbringing as children. It will be important to be aware of how our upbringing impacts our parenting and reflect on when this does and does not translate into parenting that meets the needs of the child. Also, parenting a child whose history includes loss and trauma may bring up a parent's history of unresolved losses and traumas. For example, a child's grief reactions may trigger the parent's unresolved loss and grief which may prevent them from being able to respond to the child in a supportive, nurturing way if the parent is not self-aware.

Relationally-oriented:

Relationally-oriented parents recognize and value the importance of relationships to the child. They show respect for the child's birth family and previous relationships, as well as their own relationship directly with the child. These parents know how to move beyond any anger or jealousy they may feel toward birth families to help children resolve relationship issues with birth family members, former foster families, and others so the children can ultimately grieve losses, maintain connections, and feel good about themselves.

