



Assessor Training

Post-Training
Skill-Building
Assignment #2

Birthparent Services

FROM THE FIELD

When I had my baby, I tried to block my emotions by saying things like – she isn't really my baby. Now I regret that. It's OK to bond with your baby – you will, whether you want to or not.

Jenny – birthparent

Caseworkers should proceed with an open mind when working with birthfathers. Don't stereotype us during initial interviews and don't assume I am a bad guy or that I am forcing the adoption.

Ian - birthparent

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Completing this assignment will help you:

- Gain insight into the birth family's experience;
- Draw accurate conclusions regarding family functioning;
- Identify ways to appropriately engage and empower the birthparents;
- Identify ways to provide emotional support.

INSTRUCTIONS (USE THE ATTACHED WORKSHEET TO RECORD YOUR WORK)

1. Read the attached interview conducted with three birthparents.
2. Select one of the birthparents interviewed and answer the following questions:
 - What adoption issues did you notice with this birth parent?
 - What strategies would you use to engage this birthparent?
3. Imagine this birthparent came to you at the beginning of his or her case. Create a service plan, including community resources, for this birthparent.
4. Review your service plan with your supervisor.
5. If possible, ask a current birth parent to provide feedback on the agency's service delivery.
6. Provide feedback on the assignment by completing an online survey at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=365843881460>

Birthparents Speak Out: What Caseworkers Can Do to “Get It Right”

INTRODUCTION

Below is an interview with three birthparents who will share their experience with the child welfare system. Their stories are unique, but the underlying dilemmas are the same - grief, uncertainty, outside pressure, and lack of support. During this interview, they talked about the services they received and what advice they have for today’s child welfare workers.

INTERVIEWEES

Jenny- A medical student who voluntarily placed her infant daughter for adoption approximately eight years ago.

Cathy- A parent advocate whose children were removed due to neglect approximately nine years ago.

Ian- A professional businessman who voluntarily placed his infant son for adoption approximately two years ago.

THE INTERVIEW

Interviewer: *Let’s start by having each of you tell me a little about your story - what was your life like at the time of your child’s placement and what factors led to the placement?*

Jenny: I was 18 years old when I got pregnant. I was a good student in a Catholic high school, and everyone had high expectations for me. Although I felt great pressure to not parent, my plan in the beginning was to keep my baby. I even had a crib in my room. After I graduated, I spent the summer researching government assistance and I had an anxiety attack wondering how I was going to raise my daughter. So, at about 7 months pregnant, I went to an adoption agency. I didn’t really do any “shopping around” for agencies, and it wasn’t a good experience.

Cathy: My story is very different. I am a mother of five. I’ve been sober for six years, but I abused drugs for over 20 years. Children Services was involved with me almost from the birth of my first child. I couldn’t stop using drugs. I had all kinds of reasons why I had to get high. I would leave my children with strangers or leave them alone for days, and I saw nothing wrong

with this. I was smart, and I knew how to work the system. I would put empty cans on the shelves and borrow from my neighbor so it looked like I had food. I threatened my children to not say anything. Nothing came before my drugs. As an addict, my feeling was, “Take my kids; I’ll just have another baby.”

Ian: I dated a girl on and off all through college. I moved away in the summer, and our relationship ended that fall. I found out the following January that she was about 6 ½ months pregnant. Neither set of parents approved of two, unmarried, good Catholic kids raising a child together. Because we were young, had no support from our families, and were living in different cities, we decided to place our baby for adoption.

Interviewer: *What was the involvement of the other birthparent?*

Ian: Kimberly and I made an adoption plan together. She is more laid back, so I took the lead in the planning. I still keep in touch with her, and she seems to be satisfied with how things worked out.

Jenny: Well, I was somewhat rebellious at that time. My boyfriend was a good escape for me but not a good father figure. My relationship with him pretty much ended when I became pregnant.

Cathy: My children had different fathers. When I was using I slept with men that I wouldn't even look at now. None of my children's fathers were involved, and Children Services made no effort to find them. It's kind of funny. I was trying to take care of them - at least I hadn't abandoned them, but I was charged with abuse and neglect, while no one went after the fathers.

Interviewer: *What were your feelings at the time your children were placed?*

Jenny: From the moment of her birth, I was rethinking my decision to place her for adoption. When she was born, it hit me hard that I was her mother. In the hospital, I remember they took her right away and I didn't hold her.

Cathy: I lost custody of my first child, nine years ago, when he was about five. He went to live with his father's sister. I didn't care because he would always try to tell on me and I was happy to have him out of the way. Plus, I knew he would be taken care of. My oldest daughter then went to live with her aunt. They came with a van to take my other children, but changed their minds and offered me help. I got serious when I knew they were serious. That was my wake up call.

Ian: The birth was one of the most intense periods of my life - if not the most intense - because there were such polar opposites involved. On one hand, I was tremendously happy that the birth went perfectly smooth (and, for Kimberly's sake, quick!), that our baby was completely healthy and full of smiles, and that the adoptive family fulfilled our every hope. On the other hand, there was deep sadness and feelings of loss, mixed in with some resentment of our parents' conservative views.

Interviewer: *How did you react during the first days and weeks and how did you handle the loss?*

Jenny: Because of some paperwork issue, my daughter was in foster care for about one week after she left the hospital. The foster parents were wonderful. I got to visit her once, and I am so glad I saw her. My head was clearer and I remember every detail of it. The foster parents told me how my daughter's "pick up" went, including the adoptive family's reaction to the baby book I sent. It was so important to me to hear every detail.

Ian: Our worker contacted each of us to see if there was anything she could do or if there was anything we wanted to discuss. She also reported back, at our request, that our baby was doing well. The worker had not dealt with a birthfather before, so it was uncharted territory and, to some extent, awkward. She felt that it was her responsibility to check in with me, but she really didn't know what to say.

Jenny: People in my family treated my sadness like an illness and wondered when I was going to get better. What was most helpful to me at this time was meeting with a woman from the adoption support agency. She said two things that really helped me. She talked about how adoption is lifelong - not something I'll just get over. She also educated me about openness. I had tried to block my emotions by saying things like "she isn't really my baby." I really regret that. Its okay to deeply bond - you will anyway.

Cathy: I think the caseworker could have gotten more involved in my case. I felt overwhelmed and angry that Children Services was in my life, but I did the case plan anyway because I wanted my children back. The caseworker couldn't really do anything to help me, but she could have just let me vent. That's what I do as a parent advocate - I let the parents vent!

Interviewer: *Did you feel pressured to make certain choices? What was it like to tell your family, friends, and others what had happened?*

Jenny: I really struggled with the decision to place my daughter for adoption. My mom wanted me to get an abortion so no one would know I was pregnant, and my dad

really didn't know what to do. I remember trying to talk about my baby after she was born, but the message from my mom was "don't talk about her."

Cathy: I felt I had to do what they wanted me to do to keep my kids and get my son back. My worker gave me a lot of resources, but I didn't think I needed any help. I was hanging around people who had lost their kids. That made me look better because I still had some of mine.

Ian: We were both from "good" Catholic families and weren't supposed to have a child outside of marriage. The baby just wasn't discussed in my family or in Kimberly's family. It's like it never happened.

Jenny: I remember that I was supposed to speak at a DARE program right after I learned I was pregnant. When my school found out I was pregnant, they wouldn't let me speak. I wasn't even showing. The message was - get rid of it and go on.

Interviewer: *Did you feel that you and your caseworker worked well together and was she or he respectful of any differences you may have had?*

Cathy: When my son got older, he started acting up, and his aunt took him to Children Services. They took custody, and I had to work the case plan to get him back. Although I had been sober for six years, they treated me awfully. They beat me down and gave me no respect. Once, they called me to be at a staffing in 20 minutes. Luckily, I had a car.

Jenny: I kept hearing how happy the adoptive family would be and how devastated they would be if I changed my mind. No one seemed concerned about my feelings. The focus was on how much better the baby's life would be. I wasn't having this baby to make someone else happy.

Ian: I got along well with the caseworker, but Kimberly and the caseworker had some conflict. Kimberly was more laid back and asked me to take the lead in planning the adoption. This concerned the caseworker and she kept trying to get Kimberly to be

more involved. I think she may have misinterpreted Kimberly's choice to let me do most of the planning.

Interviewer: *Did you have any input concerning the family selected for your children?*

Jenny: I was asked if I wanted an open adoption, but no one explained what that meant. I said "no" because I thought it would be easier that way. I was also given the option of picking the family, but I chose not to. If I had been told what openness was, I may have wanted to pick the family. But I think they selected a good family. My daughter's father is Filipino and the adoptive family has some Filipino relatives. It would have been better if the worker had not assumed that I knew what an open adoption meant.

Cathy: Because of the drugs, I didn't know anything about my kids. But, even when I was getting high, I was thinking about my kids. They were always on my mind; I just wasn't a good parent. I didn't want to work with my son's aunt because I thought she was trying to take him from me. When I stopped being angry, I learned a lot about my kids.

Ian: Once the agency knew we were "serious" about adoption, we were given a binder with about 90 profiles. We narrowed it down to about eight families and looked at a folder for each family. I met one family for lunch in another city. It seemed like a natural fit between us and this family, and we chose them. We were required to complete several sheets about our backgrounds, interests, etc. The standard social, medical, and family history was in there too. We also wrote a long letter about us, our families, and why we chose adoption.

Jenny: They got my social and medical history also, but it was done at the same time I completed the surrender paperwork, and I was in a crazy state of mind. I have talked to other birthmothers who have gone back and read their social and medical histories, and it wasn't right at all.

Interviewer: *Was the other birthparent's history collected and did your caseworker make an effort to include your extended family in any way?*

Cathy: Like I said before, in my case, the agency didn't get anything from the birthfathers. They need to find the father - don't just blame the mother for everything.

Jenny: In my case, I am not sure if they got the birthfather's history. He signed the surrender papers but did it separately from me. My parents were never involved in the process.

Ian: The adoption agency didn't really try to include our parents, but that was okay with us.

Interviewer: *How was the level of openness between you and the adoptive family decided?*

Jenny: After my daughter was placed, I went back and asked to see the adoptive parents' profile. It talked about how they wanted openness, so I wrote a letter. They agreed to exchange letters and pictures through the agency every six months. They kept this agreement until she was about six years old. Then, they stopped. Apparently, I put something in my letter that might identify me, and it scared the family. I continue to send letters and pictures to the agency and I believe one day we will meet again.

Cathy: Two of my kids were placed with family members. I was too angry to work with them, and my kids didn't want anything to do with me.

Ian: I feel like I am still learning about openness. I did a lot of research on my own, but the agency did help explain things to me. My son's family is very flexible. They live out of state, but I went to my son's baptism and to his first birthday party. I get emails with pictures from the family about every six weeks. The family even let us help choose his name.

Interviewer: *So, how are things going now?*

Jenny: The months after the adoption were difficult. I took a year off from school and worked at a post-adoption support agency. I had eating issues and other troubles, and I suffered from depression. I just felt like I couldn't find my focus. I started going to the birthparent support groups, and that was really helpful. Within one month of meeting my support group leader things got better - it was the first time I'd had an open discussion about my adoption. She really helped educate me.

Cathy: After 20 years of using and having open and shut cases with Children Services, I was tired. When I got a new worker, I was excited. This new caseworker outlined what I needed to do and held me accountable. She also lined up a lot of services for me. When she closed my case, I was glad to have Children Services out of my hair. She put resources in my life, made sure I got lots of counseling, and said I could call her if I needed her.

Ian: I was sort of "placed" in a support group. I thought I was going to an informational meeting, but it turned out to be a support group. I was glad I went and still try to get to meetings when I can. It is nice to talk with other people who have had a similar experience.

Interviewer: *How has your experience shaped your life?*

Cathy: Because of my experience, I am now a parent advocate. I know what it feels like to lose your kids. I tell the people I help to not focus on their worker, but to focus on getting their kids back. Social workers aren't the enemy.

Ian: I was not really in touch with my emotions, and this experience has helped me open up. Also, like Cathy, I decided to get involved. I now volunteer with an adoption organization and am in training to be a mentor to kids who are in the foster care system. As for Kimberly, she is doing well. She recently decided to get involved with Big Brothers, Big Sisters. I guess all's well that ends well.

Jenny: I feel if I had just gotten a little bit of help, I could have parented. It seemed from the very beginning they were looking at placing my baby for adoption. We made a pro and con adoption list, but the columns were even so it didn't really help me much. I wish I could have communicated my needs and feelings better. I was just so scared.

Interviewer: *What advice or recommendations do you have for caseworkers who are currently working with birthparents?*

Ian: OK, you've got to let me go first. When working with birthfathers, proceed with an open mind. Don't assume that I am a bad guy or that I am the one forcing the adoption. I am also an advocate for pre-planning the hospital experience. Thanks to our caseworker contacting the hospital and putting a note in Kimberly's medical record, all the doctors, nurses, and nursery staff knew that our son was going to be adopted. This meant that instead of celebrating with Kimberly, they took a few

extra minutes to make sure she was doing okay.

Jenny: I would tell caseworkers to assume that someone is in such crisis that they don't know what to ask. Explain everything and acknowledge that there should be no guilt for having hesitations or changing their mind. And, I really recommend post-placement counseling.

Cathy: Hold me accountable for my actions, and get me help with my addiction. I know it is their job to make sure the child is safe, but after they do that, they need to go back to the mother and get her help. Be honest, come when you say you are coming, and return calls! Build on the mom's strengths. This may not be her first time in the system, but, with help, it could be her last time.

Worksheet

BIRTHPARENT SERVICES

The birthparent I have selected is:



I noticed the following adoption issues for this birthparent (loss; control; trust; self esteem; guilt/shame; identity; rejection):

I would use the following strategies to engage this birthparent:

The service plan I would recommend for this birthparent is:

Pre-placement:

During placement:

Post-placement:

After reviewing my service plan with my supervisor I determined that I learned the following three things from this assignment:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

After talking with a current birthparent working with my agency, he or she provided the following feedback about our service delivery:

EVALUATION

OCWTP needs your feedback concerning this assignment. Please go to:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=365843881460>

to complete a short online survey. Thank you for your help!