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Exploring and developing our promise of a permanent family for every child.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? ©

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TOPIC: PREPARING TEEN FOR FAMILY (RE)CONNECTION

IDEAS: Preparing teens for a permanent family connection begins with overcoming misinformation and misconceptions. They need experiential preparation for living as full members of a family and most have to reconfigure their notions of loyalty to birth parent and shared parenting.

DISCUSSION: All children and youth have limited understanding of family and family life. How could it be otherwise? Clarissa told me that she thought all parents beat their children until she was moved to her second foster home. Those who have bounced around in foster care may have the most exposure to different families, but sometimes the least understanding. Their families shredded into foster care. They know their own family experience and they relate to the idea of family from that framework. Whether still in contact with family or reconnecting, they need a new frame. They need exposure to what family relationships can be and an understanding of the mutual responsibilities of membership. They have had few opportunities to participate in a family as young adults. And most are naturally and rightfully wary of the whole process.

Preparing teens for family is a misnomer; it's helping teens to prepare themselves. Like so much in adolescence, family preparation requires experiential learning. Even with the necessary belief in the importance of family, we can't teach it or preach it. Most of us have tried both. We can't get a full buy-in at the front end; most of us think that we need it before we can have a goal of family connection for a youth. We can't time it; we all want them to be ready right away. It has to be their process and not ours. Our challenge is to provide supportive conviction and constructive exposure. We know the elements of preparation include loyalty, loss, self-esteem, self control and self determination as well as competence, usefulness and power, what we need to work out is the how of it. In addition to the *Family Bound Program*, there are the needs for exposure to other youth who have taken the plunge, exposure to adults willing to take on the responsibility, experience with what it's like to take responsibility for oneself in a family without dire consequences when there's a mistake, and time and opportunity to process this kind of thinking with other teens and/or trusted adults.

Through it all runs the issue of family loyalty. We can talk with them about the concept of shared parenting, but it's one of those things that truly has to be worked out. In part it is understanding the universal idea of multiple parents, then it's the experience of making it work. Loyalty to one need not exclude loyalty to another. Young people need to meet people like Jason who talks comfortably and casually about being in touch with all of his 4 parents. For him it's just normal. They may also need to talk with Samantha who runs back to her birth mother every few months because she hasn't learned how to do it without a battle. And they need to know that their feelings will take the roller coaster: up and down fears, thrills and relief.

Preparation is an engaging process, not a question.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I also welcome your comments on a work in progress: **TALKING WITH TEENS**, please go to http://www.highpopples.com/Talking%20With%20Youth_files/frame.htm and let me hear from you.