

**It is not enough to know
something is true...
We must also know how to
apply that knowledge.**

The National Foster Parent Association and Centene, Corporation

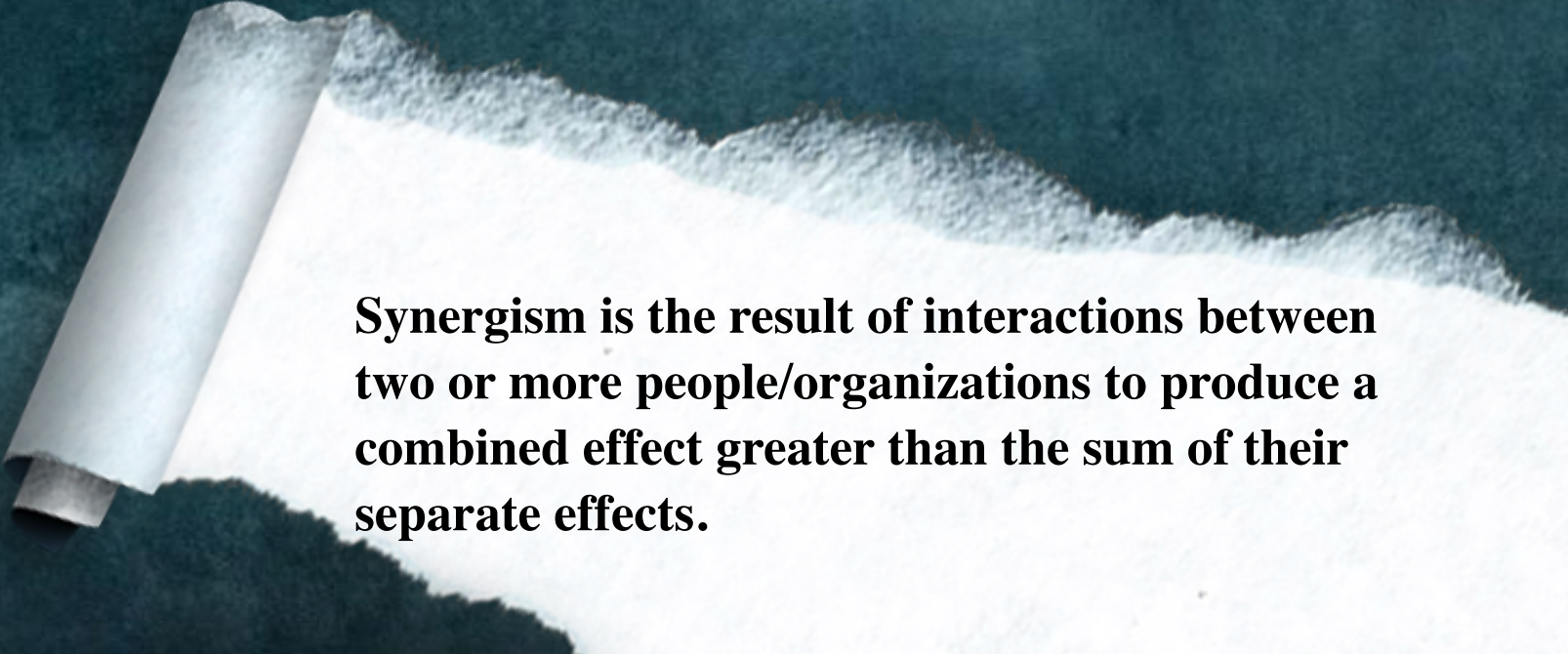
Now brings you...

Communicating with Birth Parents as Partners

By Cate Hawks, M.A.

Foster care has, historically, been experienced as a competitive model, rather than a synergistic model of care.

Today, we are going to discover the pathway of a synergistic model.



Synergism is the result of interactions between two or more people/organizations to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects.

To chart a different course we must first recognize where we are and where we have been; only then can we begin to chart a new path that leads us elsewhere.

Historically, our path begins here and will always begin here:

A child is removed from home.

You open your home and your heart to care and nurture the child. You typically receive very little information about the birth parents or birth family and often are discouraged from talking with them or meeting with them, except under close supervision.



The birth parents receive a list of requirements and a timeline that will govern their opportunity to have their child return home.



Kinship relatives are given a set of instructions and are required to submit to a series of reviews of...

- their home,
- their lifestyle, and
- their abilities

in order to preserve their family.



- The worker is set up in the unenviable position of measuring everyone to determine who will “win” the child and then tasked with taking that recommendation to a judge...who...



Sits in judgement...
to decide who “wins”.



If we keep doing things
the same way...
we will continue to get
the same results.



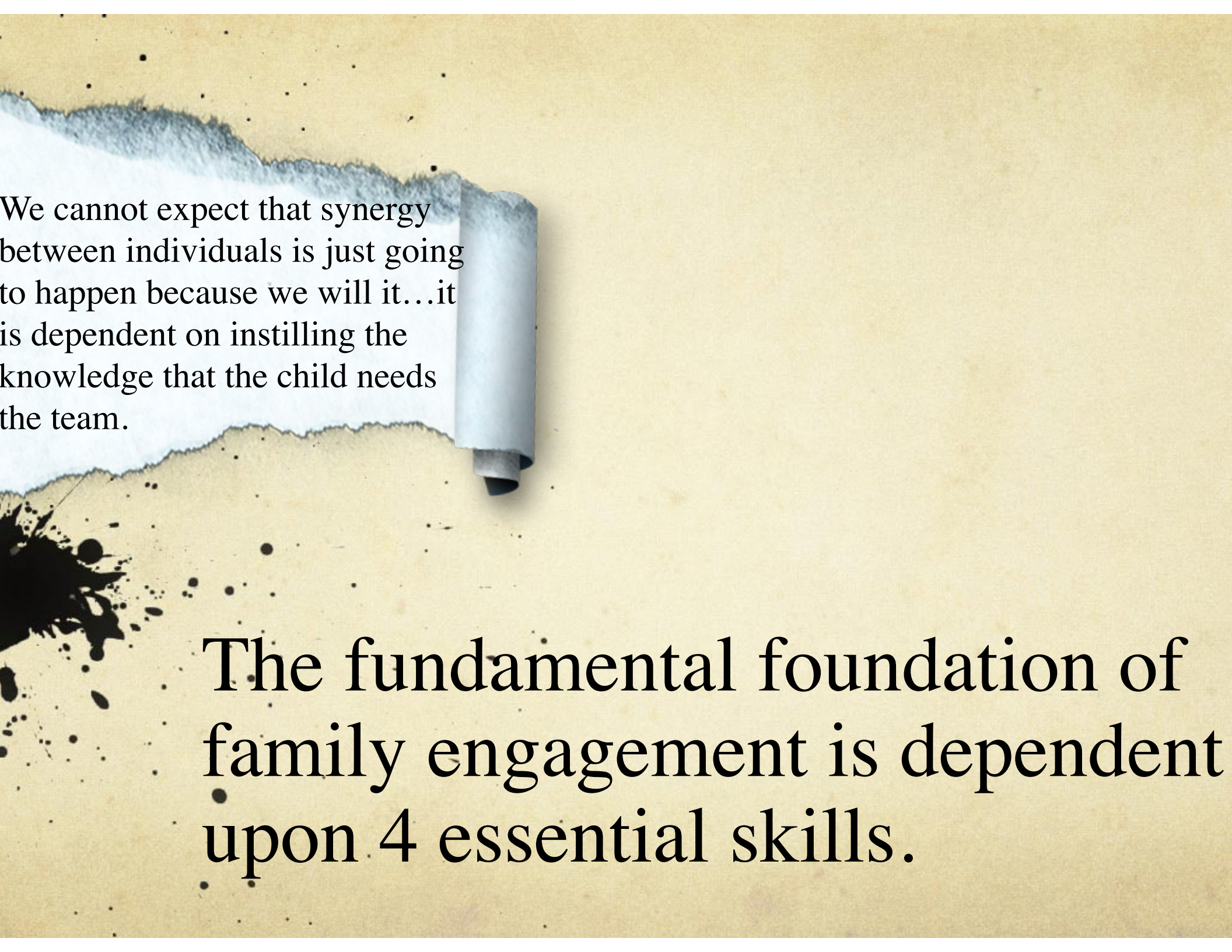
With the passage of the Family First Act...our child welfare system has the opportunity to take a different path...





The Family Engagement Model

A strength based process for developing positive and goal-oriented relationships.



We cannot expect that synergy between individuals is just going to happen because we will it...it is dependent on instilling the knowledge that the child needs the team.

The fundamental foundation of family engagement is dependent upon 4 essential skills.



Connect.

Before you can ever inspire,
motivate, or influence, you
must connect first.

-Greg
Smith



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Communicate.

To effectively communicate we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.

-Tony Robbins

Collaborate.



3

In successful collaborations,
judgment gives way to curiosity
and people come to see that other
perspectives are as valuable as
theirs.

-Francesca Gino

Re-

Create. The relationship between foster parents, workers, and birth families must be re-created, if we are to ensure that children have all the supportive relationships they need to be successful and begin to heal from trauma.



Nothing in this world compares to the
comfort and security of having someone just
hold your hand.

**Sustainable
synergy relies
on skills
building.**



Active Listening

Often times we may engage more in thinking about our response than listening to all the cues being provide both verbally and visually. When we are anxious about how we will respond we are less likely to be listening.

Learn more here:
[active listening](#)



Empathy

Empathy begins when we approach the fostering relationship with the desire to understand differences... to see what the other is seeing...and leave judgement at the door.

Learn more here:

[empathy](#)

Learn more here:

[Feedback](#)



Flexing

In the fostering experience, each person has expertise that can inform the team. We must remember to lead when our knowledge and skills are needed, and cede leadership when others have the more relevant knowledge and skills.

Learn more here:

[flexing between leader and follower](#)



Be specific.

In the fostering experience we may notice that people avoid being direct and specific; often to avoid hurting feelings.

However, properly worded feedback that is specific and not abstract in a healthy team setting can improve the progress and outcomes that families are able to experience.

Learn more here:
[Clarity and Specificity](#)



Win-Win

Synergy requires that everyone experiences success.

Learn more here:
[Win-Win Strategies](#)

Now is the time for foster parents to begin advocating in their agencies for shared training experiences. If we want to change the relationship between foster parents and birth parents as well as foster care workers, then we must all participate in the same training that will make us an effective team for children.

Our training must not only include information about rules, procedures, trauma, and child services...it must include how we work together as a team. We must learn together how we can effectively and empathically communicate and build bridges that will create sustainable relationships for children.



Presenter's Note:

One of the most valuable programs for foster parent and birth parent collaboration is:

The Quality Parenting Initiative.

Learn more about the tools and practices associated with engaging with birth families at:

<http://www.qpi4kids.org/pages/bestPractices.html>

Be sure to review the work being initiated by the CHAMPS (CHildren need Amazing Parents)

<http://fosteringchamps.org>

And...when looking for support in raising your voice to support foster care become involved in the National Foster Parent Association

<https://nfpaonline.org>