



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

December 2006

Written by: Kathy Nesteby

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Girls and Their Families at the Holidays

Everyone expends much time and effort this time of year on family relationships. It is no different for system-involved girls. Many of them are in placements away from home and some will not have the opportunity to spend significant amounts of time with their families.

We are all bombarded with the message that this is a time for joy, happiness and celebration. But, there are many who feel a sense of dread about time with family at the holidays. Most feel a combination of both. We want to see parents, grandparents, aunts and cousins. We want to sit by the fire, open gifts, play cards and eat too much. We want to tell family stories everyone laughs at despite the fact they get told every year. At the same time, we may cringe at the possibility of old wounds, grudges or just plain embarrassing situations being opened up all over again.

Girls living away from home and returning for a visit experience the same range of emotions. They need assistance sorting through those feelings and planning how to handle challenging situations should they arise. Because these girls frequently come from difficult family backgrounds and are likely to be struggling with personal hardship, it is particularly important for professionals to make the extra effort to address these issues before girls walk out the door.

Here are some questions you might consider asking girls before they go on a holiday visit:

How are you feeling about visiting your family? What worries you about your upcoming visit? Are there things that make you nervous about going home? What are you most looking forward to doing? Are there upsetting things that have happened before on visits? Are they likely to happen again? Are there family members you are likely to see on this visit that you don't usually see? Do you feel anxious about seeing any of them? What kinds of supports do you have in your home town or within your family? What things have you learned in your time here that would be helpful to you while you are home visiting?

Devise a plan with each girl about what she can do to maximize her enjoyment of time with her family and manage any challenging situations that arise. If at all possible, include family members in advance discussions about holiday visits. By doing so, you are empowering the entire family. If they are prepared and equipped to handle potential difficulties, the likelihood of a successful visit increases dramatically.

It is equally important to follow up with girls once they have returned from their visit. Giving them the opportunity to debrief whether the visit was wonderful or terrible will help ease their transition back into the environment. Time alone can also be a powerful tool. They may need to grieve the fact that they have been separated from their family at the holidays. Girls might not be ready to jump right back into a structured schedule as soon as they walk in the door. A little breathing room can go a long way.

The most meaningful thing you can do is remember to empathize. When girls are stressed about holiday visits, remember your own holiday stress. Remember your apprehension about whether your brother is still holding a grudge about what happened last Christmas. Remember your panic every time your in-laws who can't stand each other are in the same room without someone there to referee. Remember your fear of seeing your "crazy uncle" who always gets drunk and embarrasses you. Your ability to empathize with girls who are experiencing their very own holiday stress is your greatest ally this time of year.

"Programs should involve individual members of girls' families."

Component #11

from *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources*,
a publication of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.

"Efforts must be made to include families in girls' programs and services. Building structured family activities in which members interact and communicate openly is essential. Specifically, the mother-daughter relationship should be addressed. Of course, this component can be challenging. Many families are closed to outside help and/or lack adequate skills or resources to participate actively. However, for girls from physically or sexually violent family settings, it is essential to provide services as intensely for the family members as for the adolescent girls themselves. Similarly, staff should support multigenerational and extended family placements for girls who cannot return to their families of origin."

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The Girl Connection

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Kathy Nesteby, Coordinator
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915
Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov
www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
Lucas State Office Building
Des Moines, IA 50319