



January 12, 2023 - Volume 4, Edition 1



Family Bonding Program Manager Ericka Everakes works to change the way child welfare professionals approach family time for parents whose children are in foster care.

Few factors are more important than quality time to build parent-child relationships, according to family well-being expert Ericka Everakes.

The application of this principle is especially critical as it pertains to the reunification of families. Ericka, a child services administrator and manager of the Family Bonding Program at the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), is among a group of thought leaders working to shift the department’s approach to parent-child visits.

In addition to exploring different strategies and introducing new terminology, the department – by way of the Family Bonding Program – seeks to reframe the practice as one with the potential to markedly strengthen ties and safely reunify families.

“Family time can tell us a lot about parenting skills and whether parents are making adjustments and applying what they learn to strengthen their

relationship with their child,” said Ericka, a 20-year DCFS veteran.

This approach also prompts workers to consider the potential impact of different environments and strategies for structured visits. Ericka collaborates with community organizations across the county to identify family friendly locations that bring a sense of normalcy to scheduled sessions between parents and their children.

“It can be really intimidating to come into the office where you have a barren room and a worker with pen and paper watching your every move,” Ericka said. “How can we expect parents to effectively bond with their child if they are scared or feeling judged at every turn?”

To further advance this work, the department also developed a training to engage social workers on the topic of family time. The training illustrates how to help families get the most out of these opportunities. For example, social workers can encourage parents to contribute their own ideas for joint activities and can recommend limited use of electronic devices during family time.

The Family Bonding Program additionally received gift cards from philanthropic partners Pritzker Foster Care Initiative and Think Of Us to purchase baby toys, board games, craft supplies and other items that workers could utilize in monitored family time to encourage the parent-child connection.

Human Services Aide Ashlee Hitchcock said she is responsible for creating an environment that encourages bonding when she facilitates family time. She recalls the difference a handful of markers and paper made for a father trying to connect with his 2-year-old daughter.



Human Services Aide Ashlee Hitchcock uses the Family Bonding Program strategies, such as assembling bonding kits, to encourage connection when she facilitates family time.

“I knew the father liked to draw, so I set his daughter up with paper and markers and drew with her until her father arrived and joined in,” Ashlee said. “After several visits of doing this, I observed them happily drawing and laughing together.”

**Report Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect to 800-540-4000**