

## ***Ask the Expert with Sayida Peprah FAQ Sheet***

**Q: How can I help a teen mom with her parenting without overstepping boundaries or coming off as controlling?**

**A:** The first thing is how you set your mind around what your role is. Because if you're coming in with a really nurturing energy, like the way that you would ideally with your own daughter who happens to be a teenage mom, and then you realize that she needs a lot of nurturing but she's also in an experience where she has to be autonomous as a mother then she may not exactly be ready for that so you need to check in to see where she's ready and where you need to fall back or step in. It needs to be organic. One of the biggest challenges with foster care is the lack of connection sometimes with the foster parent and the mom, and not because personally they don't want to be connected, but a scenario for a lot of foster parents is you're given this teen mom or whoever the foster child is without a lot of preparation and then you're sort of thrown into the relationship. So, if you haven't formed that natural attachment to each other where you know her personality and she trusts that you love her and care for her, even though you're giving her direction and maybe giving her critical feedback then it can be difficult and it can feel like you're being controlling. The first thing is to establish the relationship, otherwise no matter what you do, it can be taken wrong. We all know that in our own relationships- you get into a trust phase and you might have some guardedness with that.

**Q: What can a foster parent do when you have a foster teen mom who sometimes parties and goes out with her friends and leaves the baby to the foster parent?**

**A:** First, I would say that if that's already happening, there's going to be a strong need to step back and re-establish boundaries and expectations, because the mom really shouldn't feel like that's an option- that she walks out and leaves the baby unattended without care. It's important for everybody, in the beginning, to get the clarity of those rules; that this is your baby, he/she is not my foster child. You are the one under my care and I'm here to help you parent your children and to be supportive to you and to help you grow in the process of parenting. With that in mind, it shouldn't be the case that the mom is leaving the babies, but I know the nature of young people and I've had experiences with teen moms who were very truant in their personalities and the way they were as teenage girls and you would expect a level of attachment to their babies and not wanting to leave their babies without care, but I recognize that's not the case. Not all teen moms are going to leave their babies just like that and go to parties. The ones that do it's important to step back and clarify those boundaries. To start off, when you have a teen mom, make sure you have really clear rules and expectations for when she's going to have break time and what that means. I would always encourage to start from the beginning, the way you want it to be at the end. It's really hard to come back when you're doing behavioral training with people, which is basically what we're doing a lot with children and people in our care; you should start with how are you going to do this and what is the expectation here? When she wants to make plans, she has to make plans for

herself and her children. It's natural in a young person's mind to be very self-centered, so you're also working with someone who's developing an awareness that they aren't the only person in the universe; that's the fun and the challenge of parenting teens all together. You need to just lay out that understanding and for some of them that means you need to sit down and have conversations about what that looks like; actually demonstrate it. Don't just expect her to know that if she wants to go out with her friends then she has to have a plan about child care, which means she needs to ask you if you're going to watch the children, which means she needs to coordinate with your schedule and know that sometimes it's not going to be convenient for you. Especially with the older teens in foster care, they kind of come with their own set of rules; they are a lot more complicated than the younger ones who are in your complete care and you're the only ones that can really watch her unless you have an emergency sitter as a part of the CPS contract. The teens can spend time by themselves- many of them can have up to 4 hours alone in the community without your observation and can kind of be on their own. It can be a potential that she has connections to family, with the child's father or other people that have been given access to have connection with her and the children and if that's something that the social worker is comfortable with, her having her child in the care of a family member who is going through the process, then that may be something to consider too- that you're not the only one who can watch the child. The strategy is to have a plan for when you're going to do something- if it's going to the mall or going out with friends or just going to have me time or with the child's father alone, or whatever it is, what is your plan for child care? Having them learn that you can't ask me the night before, or you can't ask me the hour before, or whatever works for you. You may be flexible and may be a completely stay at home foster mom and that's fine. But if you are a working foster mom, with a schedule and you like to have your own free time then it's going to really require some coordination. I recommend using the technology that we have and I use that in my own family. We all share a google calendar and I have a family calendar that's on a white board. We all have it in proximity so we all know our schedules- they know that they can't ask me to be somewhere on a day that I'm supposed to be doing something else and vice versa.

**Q: How can the foster parent set boundaries without coming off as unsupportive?**

**A:** Again, lead with trust and relationship and let that be the most important thing that you're hearing me say. There's technique, but you also have to have that relationship. When you set boundaries early, it feels less restrictive and less confrontational and more like let's come up with a plan together rather than when you set boundaries later. When a girl is just pregnant is the best time to sit and talk about what the plan is going to be because before it's all the chaos of having the baby and taking care of the baby. It's really just her thinking about herself, feeling what her body is feeling and going to doctor's appointments. Or if the baby is already there or she's coming to you with a toddler then you can seem like a very supportive foster parent if you have the conversation of, "hey, you're about to have a baby and you are still a young, growing woman and I want to make sure that you have time for yourself and don't get lost in parenting, just like I as a foster mom or mother need time for myself, you're going to need time for yourself. Even though this is your baby, you're also going to need the opportunity to create

space just like any other mom would, so I want to help you do that and I want us to come up with a plan where we can do that where it works for both of us and we can both have some predictability and I can support you in a way that can be helpful because if I have a plan then we can work towards that". And I always throw in the caveat that I have a very busy schedule, so things need to be predictable and organized. If we have a plan then both of us can rely on that and I can do my best to meet the needs that you're asking for and I just ask that you follow the strategy that we come up with together so we can make this work. Then you can sit down with the calendar, journal, or whatever it is and practice what that looks like- plan a demonstration weekend with all the details. Then they feel like you really want them to have their time and want to nurture them. The foster parent can ask, "while I have your baby, what are some things that you want that are really important to you for me to do with your baby?" because that's what a mom would do right? When you have a babysitter, you tell them the important things for them to do. Teach her that she should tell people how to have them care for her child, not just when they're dropping them off; that's another developmental thing that all mothers need coaching on when they're first starting. This way it feels supportive, there's no feelings of restrictions or boundaries. Come up with this together- what works for you, what works for me. Over time things work out in the beginning, but don't work over time. It should be re-visited and negotiated, that way it doesn't feel like a rule or feel very harsh. She's already a mom so she's in a stressful and emotional time. Sometimes there's a breach from family that can make her feel even less supported, so you want to encourage her to feel like you're on her team.

**Q: Would you recommend having your teen mom participate in extra-curricular activities and take time away from being a mother?**

**A:** Absolutely, every mom needs that. It's the secret to minimizing postpartum depressions and anxieties and just being overwhelmed even if it doesn't become clinically significant. It helps to have your own space and time. Remember that this is still a young person developing in their adulthood and competencies and their ability to go out in the world and make a life for themselves. They still need the time to be able to develop skills that they need to work on. Beyond school- if they're an artist or sing- whatever brings them joy, find some way to give her a sense that she still has time for herself. It's important, not just because she's still a teen, but also because she's a new mom. I would definitely support extra-curricular activities.

**Q: Can you give more details about secure attachment and why it's beneficial? Do you have any videos or books that you can suggest as resources?**

**A:** Secure attachment is the first and most important thing to me as a psychologist when I'm working with someone- a child or adult of any age. It really impacts the way that you deal with life. I talked about the concept of secure attachment in the pre-recorded video, but if you didn't see that, it's basically that we come into the world completely vulnerable, everything we need we have to get from our primary caregivers and when we have that then we feel like the world is safe. The brain says, this is a safe place to grow and explore. The eyes open, the hands start feeling around and touching things, the mouth gets hungry to eat things and be sucking

on things and to be active in the environment because it's safe and not scary. It feels like you want to expand yourself. The sense of security that you feel allows your brain to develop and your emotional and physical body to develop. If you don't have that then all of those factors- mind, body, spirit, psychology- shut down and go inside and you don't feel like it's a safe world. It's a narrative that plays out for kind of the rest of your life. It sets and creates a default. You may be able to rise from that if you have lots of resilience or reparative experiences or if you are fortunate to come into a different environment and re-learn some of those patterns. Then the baseline for that person is this is a safe world/this is not a safe world or these are scary people, these people that are supposed to feed and care for you leave you for hours in a wet diaper and hungry. I can't trust people, but I love you mommy and I need you to feed me, so hi, help me, play with me and then crying because mom isn't there. Ambivalence is created because as primary care providers you have to have them, you can't decide that you don't want them anymore because you literally need them to live, so then the narrative is the people that love me, hurt me. You can imagine how that plays out into adulthood and teenage years. Secure attachment is very important because without it, there can be a deficiency in people psychologically and emotionally. But it's also important because it creates so much resiliency for life and all the potential challenges and unfortunate things that can happen in the course of a life. If you start off with an early childhood experience, and I always say from birth to seven is important to recognize because you are developing those things that set you in a default emotionally and psychologically. If you have that secure attachment, even if at 10 years old you are sexually abused or end up in foster care or if anything happens in life, then at the baseline you still feel like the world is safe and you can find a place of peace. Even though you had a bad experience, it's possible that there is someone who can love you because you've been loved and that stays as a predominant default in a person so they do look for opportunities to make a better situation and they do look for different relationships than the ones that are hurting them. It's imperative that young people experience secure attachment and also that the moms are taught why it's so important; especially if they end up in foster care, there's been some sort of breach in life, so for them to know that this is their chance to set their child up for a better situation is also very valuable. The foundational text for the idea of secure attachment is *Secure Attachment: Parenting From The Inside Out* and it's by Daniel Siegel. I think that's a good place to start to get a concept of secure attachment and why it's so important for parents. Go on YouTube and search, because depending on where you are in your stage of parenting, the age of the children, where you're living or your cultural demographic, there are so many resources out there for parents. I really encourage people to look at videos of demonstrations of secure attachment that are done by psychologists, colleges, physicians and pediatricians that are really putting out a lot of information to parents since there is so much diversity. I may create a list of them and add them to my website. I will put a list of YouTube videos I suggest on my website- drsayidapeprah.com.

**Q: What are some ways that a teen mom can build a stronger attachment to her baby, specifically if the baby is a little older, like a toddler?**

**A:** Teaching attunement is very important for secure attachment. Attunement is paying attention, listening, noticing needs and then being sensitive in how you're relating, fulfilling and addressing the needs. That's really the foundation of secure attachment- mommy, I'm hungry but all I have is one cry, so figure it out. Being attuned is paying attention to- do you hear the different sound of the cry? What does it sound like when she's hungry? Pay attention. If you're a parent, it's easier for you because you've learned the differences of the cries in your own children and you've had the experiment in your own life after nights and nights and you can tell the difference. You see young women will have a baby that's crying and the grandma will come over and say, "give me the baby" and she'll do something that makes the baby settle, while the young mother doesn't know what exactly to do. It's all the same once you've mastered it. If you are a parent then you all will learn together, which is great being that you get to show the vulnerability of parenting, like sometimes the thing that worked for your children won't work for other people's children. Attunement is important because it makes you able to attend to anything and everything a person needs for the first time that you've ever experienced it. That's the whole point of attunement- that I noticed something, let me figure what it is, let me care to it, let me be sensitive to it. If the child is a toddler and you can ask them and they can speak about it, then getting them to communicate that. But even if the child can speak, toddlers and their acting out and tantrums, instead of seeing it as something to be upset about, use it as an opportunity to learn their capacity. My oldest never napped and I was a young active mom who didn't want to be home for nap time, but I realized it was because she didn't really need that. I would go out for a while and do stuff then simmer down and maybe go to the park until she was tired. But generally, she could just go and was active. While my second one was very much more regimented- she went to sleep at a certain time and needed long hours of sleep at night. You're going to have to pay attention to what they need and learn to accommodate to that. Experimentation of that with the parent and the foster parent is helpful, because everybody sees that it's about learning, listening and paying attention.

**Q: Do you have any input or insight on teen moms that come into foster care with a CSEC background and what have your experiences been? What can foster parents do with a youth that has a high AWOL history?**

**A:** It's very important to be clear about your expectations from the beginning. It's also important to recognize that coming into a situation with a teen that is AWOL is a train that has been going a long time. You're going to do your best as a foster parent to create expectations with them, to have conversations with the social worker about what the social worker's expectation is around your ability to manage that. I had a teen mom who was very AWOL. Not all of them were, most were very active with their children and wanted to stay at home. But one, I had been told that she was going to AWOL all the time, so we had a long conversation and I asked her what was going on. She was very guarded and that was the state that she came in. She did not want to talk about why she kept running away. We got through the first week where she went to school, but then we woke up Saturday morning and she was gone. It's terrifying, but fortunately I had a really strong relationship with the social worker and she

realized that she should keep her phone on all weekend and be available because it would be likely that I would be calling her in an emergency. It's the social worker's role to then go look for the child, so as a foster parent you are really just there to be available once they come back. If the social worker needs something more from you then they will let you know. Ultimately, the child was 17 and close to aging out and she really didn't want to be in foster care or be a part of the system in any way. If they are truly AWOLing then you can try to create a situation where they feel like they can talk to you and you will receive them back. However, you don't know what's hurting them on the inside or what has happened to them prior, so you don't want them to feel like they are going to come back to your house and will be chastised. Simply tell them, this is scary and dangerous and I want you to know the dangers of the world and why it would be better for you to just be here. You can offer to drop them off somewhere and be there to pick them up or have them take the bus as long as it goes along with how many hours they can be out. See if you can work with them to give them the independence that they want. It's important to be reality-based with them. Life has been difficult for them for whatever reason and they do not want to be a part of the system- they want to be independent. Give them some empathy around the fact that they feel that way. Regarding the young women with the child sexual abuse background, you can potentially always have girls that have had that, many of mine had. In my experience, the social worker didn't specifically say that, but it was something that came out over the course of our relationship in conversations. You need to create a therapeutic relationship. Foster parenting gets to be an opportunity to heal and have a relationship that's empowering, nurturing, supportive and safe. They're going to test you to see how safe you are. Things to think about with a child who has been sexually abused is that they're going to be guarded about you, potentially your partner, whoever is living in the house with you, your own children and other people that are around because they've experienced other adults or children that have been around that have broken boundaries with them. That level of guardedness is a healthy response from a child that has been sexually abused because they need to be guarded because people are not always safe, especially in an environment outside of family, where they maybe feel more vulnerable; that's a reality. Understand that their guardedness is a healthy coping for themselves and the way that people undo that isn't just behavioral; they are going to have to develop a relationship that makes them feel like they're safe and then you can help them expand that feeling of safety to people who are in your network that they can learn to feel safe around and let it grow in a natural way. The other thing is that a lot of times they haven't had the opportunity to talk about their sexual abuse, they have just been managing life and whatever the challenges are with their family that got them into foster care. Being available for them to talk and not necessarily asking them questions, unless it seems like they want you to. Attune to them. Give them an opportunity to talk if they haven't been able to. Encourage the social workers to set up therapy with them so they have a professional place to process their trauma, because once they're in a safe and stable place, that's the time when they can start processing trauma. If you're able to facilitate that for them, that would be great. During pregnancy and childbirth, sexual trauma can be triggered because of the nature of the focus on the genitalia and going to doctor's offices and opening up your legs for strangers, can be really stressful. I would really attune to that- you can

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ask directly or just notice it, if it seems like she's uncomfortable with that. You can say, "I know you've been sexually abused, how do you feel about the exam providers doing your OBGYN exams?" "How do you feel about having a male doctor versus a female doctor?" Maybe you need to just advocate for them having a female, if they're uncomfortable with males. In the hospital, if you're able to be with them during their labor that would be helpful or arrange for them to have a doula, because having labor and pregnancy support is very important for those who have experienced trauma. Being in a hospital can be very off-putting with all these people with all this power over you and you as this teen mom, they don't often respect you as much because you're a teen and having this baby. It can be very disempowering and can feel assaulting and traumatic. To have someone who is there to honor your autonomy and help people respect you in your birthing space is very important and can be very healing for her if she has experienced sexual trauma.