



Olivia's Story

FOR SESSIONS ONE THROUGH NINE OF ARC REFLECTIONS

SUMMER 2017

ARC REFLECTIONS

ARC, or Attachment, Regulation and Competency, is a framework for working with children and teens who have experienced trauma. Developed by Margaret Blaustein and Kristine Kinniburgh of the Justice Resource Institute, ARC builds on the resilience of children, teens and families.

ARC Reflections — an ARC-informed caregiver training curriculum for foster parents, kin and other caregivers — was written by Blaustein and Kinniburgh with support and consultation from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The model was piloted in six child welfare agencies in 2015 and evaluated by Child Trends, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center with a focus on child welfare.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

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MEET OLIVIA

OLIVIA — SESSION ONE

Olivia is a 5-year-old girl of mixed ethnicity. Her parents used substances (primarily heroin, alcohol and marijuana) and there was frequent violence in their relationship.

The family moved four times during Olivia's first two years and was homeless once. Often Olivia's mother would leave her with friends or other relatives for brief periods.

Olivia and her mother moved into a shelter when Olivia was 3 years old, but her mother returned to Olivia's father after six months.

Two months later, her father was incarcerated because of a domestic violence incident and multiple intent-to-distribute charges. He was arrested in front of Olivia.

Olivia was removed from her mother's custody three months later after allegations of neglect and physical abuse.

In the past year, Olivia has lived in three different foster homes. She was just placed in her current home.

Olivia's mother has been unable to comply with service plans requiring treatment of her diagnosed bipolar disorder and substance abuse.

Questions to consider

- What in Olivia's experience would you consider traumatic? Why?
- What do you think Olivia has learned about relationships? How do you think she might react to other people?
- What do you think Olivia has learned about herself in the past five years?
- How do you think Olivia got through her experience? What survival skills might she have learned?

OLIVIA — SESSION TWO

Situation 1: When Olivia was living with her biological parents, her house was unpredictable. Sometimes there was a lot of screaming and violence and things felt very scary. In those moments, Olivia learned to stay very still or to hide. If no one saw her, it felt like she was safer.

Situation 2: At other times, when Olivia's mom was using, she might be affectionate or loving toward Olivia, even if her behaviors didn't always make sense. Olivia had to work hard to get her mother's attention, because her mom would seem spacey or talk to herself. If Olivia climbed on her mother, hugged her or cried loudly, her mother would sometimes give her a hug or rock her.



Question to consider

What behaviors might Olivia have learned from:

- Situation 1: _____

- Situation 2: _____

To understand Olivia...

Use this sequence:

1. **Remember the lens:** Perception is reality.
2. **Behavior addresses a need:** Survival trumps everything else.
3. **Ability to recover:** Where are the resources?

What might trigger Olivia?

- Loud noises
- Angry voices
- Being yelled at
- Being ignored or left alone
- Not having her needs met or being told “no”
- Feeling frightened

Some of Olivia’s strategies:

- Paying a lot of attention to the emotions and behaviors of people around her and changing her own behavior in response.
- Freezing, hiding or getting very silent when she hears loud noises.
- Clinging, acting needy or having very big emotional displays when someone seems distracted.

OLIVIA — SESSION THREE

Olivia is 5 years old and has been in her new foster home for about six months now. It is her longest placement since entry into the system.

Olivia continues to be a challenge. While chronologically she is 5 years old, developmentally she appears much of the time more like a 2- or 3-year-old. She needs constant support and supervision to

complete daily tasks related to self-care, feeding and using the toilet. She has very limited capacity for independent play and is persistent in her attempts to engage positive or negative attention.

When attention is provided by her foster parents she often rejects it, screaming, “I hate you” or “I want a new family.” Minor redirection can lead to severe and persistent tantrums that include screaming, crying, throwing things, profane language and, at times, aggression toward her foster parents. Even on good days, she still melts down every night at bedtime, crying and clinging when her foster mother leaves the room.

OLIVIA — SESSION FOUR

Olivia is now 6 and on her fourth foster placement. The home she is in is noisy — four kids, two dogs and some extended family. Her foster mother works in child care and is enthusiastic about playing with Olivia.

Olivia is overwhelmed by all the chaos. She has lost three homes in three years and does not trust that this one will stick.

She is quiet and watchful and resists her foster mother’s attempts to engage her. When her foster mother tries to play, Olivia sometimes shuts down, but may explode, yell and scream.



OLIVIA — SESSION FIVE

Imagine that...

- Olivia comes home after a hard day at school. Kids were talking about her, someone laughed at her and her teacher said she wasn’t working hard enough. Someone wrote, “You’re stupid!” on the new notebook her mentor gave her.
- She arrives home, slams the door and ignores your attempt to say hello. When you ask what the problem is, she says, “School sucks. I don’t want to go back.”

Can you imagine making any of these statements?

- Don’t be so dramatic.
- Don’t slam the door.
- Calm down — you aren’t helping yourself by getting so stressed out.
- Why don’t you just talk to your teacher about what’s going on?
- It’s only a notebook — you can get another one.
- Stop talking to me so disrespectfully.

OLIVIA — SESSION SIX

Olivia is 7 years old and has been moving her way through foster homes for the past two years. She has just entered a new home after a series of failed placements because adults could not cope with her tantrums, not listening, stealing and lying.

- She has been a challenge from the first day: Although she seemed thrilled to be in the home, calling her foster parent “Mom” immediately, she melts down every night at bedtime, crying and clinging when “Mom” leaves the room.
- Her foster mother has noticed that small items from around the house are missing, but when she confronts her about it Olivia shuts down, denies taking anything and then explodes and says, “You don’t care about me. I hate you!”
- Olivia can be endearing and charming at times, but often feels exhausting. She demands help with many things that her foster parents expect her to be able to do for herself (get dressed, tie her shoes) and cries and screams when they suggest she try it herself. When they try to comfort her, she pushes them away.

OLIVIA — SESSION SEVEN

Olivia is 7. She continues to steal small items and hoard food in her new foster home. She can be affectionate with her foster parents, but gets overwhelmed, clingy and demanding when asked to do small tasks. At times, her anger increases and she throws things at her foster mother.

She appears to be settling into her new bedtime routine but has a hard time separating at lights out and her anxiety can escalate, which can spur a lengthy tantrum.

What might Olivia’s needs be?

Hoarding: Need fulfillment? Fear of not having enough to eat? Survival strategy?

Bedtime separation: Relational reassurance? Fear of nighttime? Fear of being alone? Fear of foster parents not being there when she wakes up? Difficulty transitioning?

Throwing objects: Arousal response — survival? Engaging attention? Engaging task help?
Getting space?

Use Your Go-Tos: Meet Needs

Every time Olivia’s foster parents cleaned, they found old, uneaten, often rotten food in drawers and behind the bed. Establishing consequences was not effective. Working with Olivia’s therapist, her foster parents:

- Identified a kitchen drawer and filled it with healthy snacks. They made it Olivia’s drawer; only she could take food from it. They regularly made sure it was full.

- Put a food-safe garbage can in her room for any food-related products.
- Stopped talking about the issue.

The biggest power struggle that Olivia's foster parents had was around Olivia's completion of simple chores and self-care strategies. When she escalated to the point of throwing objects, the parents often escalated themselves.

Olivia's therapist guessed that the throwing might actually be a request for support rather than a distancing strategy. As an experiment, Olivia's foster mother began to do simple chores with Olivia. For instance, she would say, "Olivia, let's pick up these toys. Which ones should we pick up first?" When she engaged with Olivia, she found the opposition decreased dramatically and Olivia was able to actively participate. Eventually, Olivia was able to complete many tasks independently when her foster mother was in the room and available.

Example Proactive Response to Behavior

Behavior: Throwing things at foster mother when overwhelmed completing tasks.

Problem Solving: Olivia's foster mother sat with Olivia when she was calm, during their evening chat time. They talked about how everyone in the home was an important part of the family and contributed to keeping the house running smoothly.

The foster mom noted that chores were hard for Olivia and asked if they could figure out a way to help Olivia feel more successful at doing them.

When Olivia had a hard time generating ideas, her foster mother suggested that the two of them practice doing chores together. She also talked about ways Olivia could tell her she was feeling overwhelmed.

Praise and Reinforcement: Olivia's foster parents worked hard to notice when Olivia helped around the house (cleaned up her toys, put clothes in the laundry, did age-appropriate self-care such as brushing teeth) and made sure to comment on it. They also began to tune into and name moments when Olivia got upset but didn't become aggressive, praising her for using her regulation tools.

Limit Setting: When Olivia escalated to throwing and hitting, the adult quickly stopped the activity and tried to mirror affect or energy (saying, "I see you are upset," or "Your energy just got really big") and cue Olivia to take a break.

If this did not work, her foster parent would carry her to the regulation corner (a special corner set up with blankets, pillows and comfort objects) and either sit with Olivia in his or her lap or wrap her in a blanket. They remained in the corner until it was clear that Olivia was calmer. Once she was calm, they talked about what happened, reminded Olivia that it was OK to be angry but not to throw things and put any thrown toys in "toy time-out" for 10 minutes.

Problem Solving: During the evening chat time, Olivia's foster parents would talk with her about any incidents, their observations of Olivia's behaviors and her feelings, and discuss ways to handle things differently the next time. Over time, they were able to identify early warning clues that Olivia was having a hard time and used a special silly code phrase ("purple-spotted dinosaurs") to cue Olivia to use her regulation corner. They also made chore times predictable.

Praise: Whenever Olivia went to her corner when cued, used coping skills or completed chores successfully, her foster parents gave her a high-five or verbal praise.

OLIVIA — SESSION EIGHT

Olivia is 9 now and has been living with her foster parents for almost three years. Her foster parents have learned a lot about her. For example, she loves to dance and sing and has a dramatic flair. She shines on stage.

Her foster parents worked with the school to find an arts-based after-school program that has regular performances. She often brings home special projects. Her foster parents have set up a wall in the kitchen to display her artwork. They also made a keepsake box for special crafts, photos, assignments and other mementos.

Olivia is developing a relationship with a maternal great aunt. They had little contact before Olivia entered foster care but her aunt is now bringing her to church and introducing her to extended family members.

Olivia's foster parents struggled to support this relationship at first, because the visits often left Olivia feeling emotional. Over time, the foster parents have begun to feel grateful that Olivia is developing strong connections to family members and learning about her cultural roots.

As visits with her aunt have increased, Olivia has begun to share positive memories of her parents, with whom she no longer has contact and is expressing a profound sense of grief.

Olivia's behavior has improved greatly over the years. She still has some hard days. But she seems more confident, is mostly able to be independent in an age-appropriate way and can generally tolerate her foster parents' feedback when she makes mistakes.

Her foster parents have gone from having to look for opportunities to tell her they are proud to genuinely feeling proud of all she has accomplished. They feel much more confident in their own ability to get through hard days.

OLIVIA — SESSION NINE

Olivia has just turned 10 and in three months, she will be transitioning full time to her aunt's home. After a year of increasing contact, her aunt has committed to becoming her legal guardian. Olivia has

said that she is excited and nervous and her behaviors have gotten more challenging as the time has gotten closer. She is clingier with her foster mother, struggling with bedtime separation for the first time in a year, but also sometimes seeming quieter and more remote.

Olivia's foster parents have mixed feelings about her upcoming transition. Her foster father feels positive about the change. He likes her aunt and though he is sure he will miss Olivia, he believes she has come a long way and is ready for a "forever" placement.

Olivia's foster mother has been surprised by how much sadness she is feeling. Although she always thought of this as a short-term placement, she is finding herself feeling angry at the aunt without reason and is sure she herself could provide a better home. She is concerned that everything will fall apart again and that Olivia will be hurt more than she already has been.

Olivia's aunt is committed but anxious. Her own children are grown and out of the house and it feels like a long time since she's had a child in the home. Her relationship with Olivia's mother, her niece, was always strained and they disconnected years ago. She was surprised when child welfare approached her about Olivia, but has grown to really care about this child and believes she can do right by her.



The time has been drawing closer for Olivia to transition to her aunt's home and her foster parents have been helping her sort through her belongings. Together, they have gone through her keepsake box and created a scrapbook of her favorite artwork from the past three years. Olivia picked three pictures to leave behind and she and her foster mother framed them together.

Although Olivia has had a fair amount of time to get to know her aunt, a lot of questions keep coming up. Her foster parents gave her a shoebox to use as a Question Box, along with a pad of paper. Every time she thinks of a new question, she writes it down. During their evening chat time, they go through her questions and anything her foster parents can't answer. They make a plan with her for how to find out.

Olivia has been worried about how to pack her things. She still has strong memories of her clothes and toys being placed in garbage bags and remembers a teddy bear being left behind when she was small.

The week before she is due to move into her aunt's home, Olivia's foster father takes her to a department store and lets her pick out two large purple duffel bags and a smaller one to carry her special dolls and animals. At home, they make a list of important things she wants to be sure not to leave behind.

In the weeks before the transition, Olivia, her foster parents and her aunt have had several meetings, talking about: Olivia's favorite meals, where her friends live and their phone numbers, her bedtime routine and many other things. Although her aunt already knew a lot of this, Olivia has felt better hearing them repeated and watching her aunt write things down.

One thing they have been talking about is whether Olivia can still speak to her foster parents. Her aunt has said that she can call whenever she wants and her foster parents have made a plan to speak to her once a week in the beginning.

The day comes and Olivia's bags are packed. Her aunt arrives to take her to her new home.

OLIVIA IS GROWING UP

Olivia is 17 and will graduate from high school next month. She and her aunt have formed a strong, loving relationship over the years. Recently, Olivia has cautiously reconnected with her mother, who is newly clean and sober and living in her community. Olivia has kept in touch with her last foster parents over the years although the communications have been less frequent.

Olivia's aunt has kept her in dance classes throughout high school since Olivia still loves the arts and performing.

Olivia was recently accepted to the state university. Next year, she will live at home, attend school part time and continue her job teaching young children at her studio.

Olivia's story did not begin when she was placed in foster care and it did not end when she left it. But her time there influenced the path she took. **Never underestimate the role you play with all the Olivias out there.**

