

A year ago I gave birth to my son. The moment he was placed in my arms I knew I was meant to be his mommy. When he was almost eight weeks old, he was placed into foster care (due to an injury). It was the most heartbreaking and earth shattering experience I have ever had. He had been with me every day since his birth. We spent very little time apart. It was two and a half weeks after he was placed into foster care that I received a text from the Family Alliance of Paulding's program director. I went the following day to be introduced to the center and start my two day a week visits with my son.

I sat quietly during the orientation process and only spoke when spoken to. I was still in shock and not very trusting of the world around me. It was three additional days before I was able to see my son. I remember walking through the door and seeing a woman, I had never seen before, holding him. I would later come to know her as my son's foster mom.

The first visit, my son didn't give any indication of remembering who I was. It broke my heart. I had worked so hard to bond with my child, and my biggest fear was the bond would be broken. At the end of the visit I broke down in tears. The program director placed her hand on my shoulder and told me it was going to be ok. I nodded and quickly left the center. Those words had upset me even more.

Everyone kept telling me that it was going to be ok. I wasn't sure that it would be. For the next two weeks after my visits, I would rush to the safety of my car and break down into tears. I know there were times when the program director witnessed this, but instead of intruding, she would let me have that moment to collect myself and process my emotions. Visitation center staff lobbied for our visits to become three times per week because this time period is so important for babies to bond with parents and crucial to my son's development.

I eventually became comfortable enough to confide my fear in the visitation center director. I still worried that I was losing the bond with my son. I knew what long term effects this could have on him, not only mentally, but socially. This was very frightening to me. Visitation center staff assured me that my son still knew who I was. They said they could tell by his reaction to the sound of my voice, my touch, and even my smell. The director asked me if I ever noticed that as soon as I held him, he turned to smell me and then snuggled down into me? Or, when I spoke to him, did I notice that the corners of his lips turn up into a slight smile. I never noticed any of this.

I then realized I was looking for the wrong signs. The program director explained how a child's development worked and the cues I was looking for were seen in babies a little older than my son. For the first time I felt better. I began to know the visitation center staff well. Slowly I began to become more trusting and eventually let my guard down.

The program director and I would go on to have many more conversations on topics like how to further bond with my son, books to read, and other things as a first time parent I just didn't know. As the months passed, my son and I continued to develop our bond. All the signs that I was looking for in the beginning, I eventually began to see. I no longer have any doubt in our connection or how closely we are bonded. Part of this is due to the visitation center, and the people who work there. I've seen it, not only in my case, but in several others as well. They have a way of understanding what each family needs and tailoring their approach around those needs.

The work they do is so important, and in so many ways, vital. I know if I hadn't had the Family Alliance of Paulding, Inc. visitation center, my story could be completely different, and my son would be the one to suffer for it. I will forever and always be grateful for them and the work they do.

NOTE: This mom and son were reunified within eight months of removal. She worked hard to do the right thing for her child. The father in this case continues to work diligently toward reunification with the whole family.

The Welcome Home Center for Supervised Family-time provides a safe and nurturing environment for non-custodial parents and their children to maintain their familial bond. For more information on supervised visitation and/or parenting education services, call 678-202-5777, ext. 101 or email visitation@familyallianceofpaulding.org