It is important therefore to see any acting up as a symptom of some underlying concerns and to try to determine what those concerns are. Stopping the visits may only increase the child's tension.

III. The Need for Communication Between Natural and Foster Parents

The child retains love and loyalty for his natural parents. He also develops affection for his foster parents and depends upon their day to day support and care. He, more than anyone else, is acutely sensitive to the feelings of all these significant adults and is quick to sense conflict and anger among them. Consequently, the very best situation for these youngsters is one where there is agreement among all his parents as to his care.*

If there is conflict and tension the child is pulled between both sides. The foster family may see some acting up at home, or hear of problems at school. There may be difficult behaviors erupting before a visit or on the way home. Older children might play on the conflict and exacerbate the situation by telling the foster parents that they can't "tell him what to do" because they're not his real mother or father. Similarly, they can refuse to listen to a natural parent because "they're in jail, so how can they tell him what is right or wrong.

If the parents talk to one another and share these episodes several things happen -- First, the child is reassured that all the important adults in his life are in contact. If the foster parents and natural parents truly like one another so much the better, for it then takes the burden off the child's shoulders of having to demonstrate his loyalty and affection against all odds -- he can accept his positive feelings without fanfare.

Secondly, the child can't play one parent against the other, because the adults are in contact and retain control. If thenatural mother says without hesitancy that they discuss his behavior and he is to listen to his foster mother, it gives the foster family the united front they need to set and enforce limits. If in turn, the foster mother makes it clear to the child that the limits set, are with the advice and consent of his natural parent, that gives a strong message to the youngster, that in spite of incarceration his parent is indeed capable of disciplining him.

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* The ideal model to re-create is a family one, where e.g. a mother may be unable to care for the child and a grandmother or aunt steps in. In such circumstances there is an assumed trust between the adults that the child will be brought up with shared familial values and where one would anticip easy communication between mother and her family. Of course, in a foster care situation, the foster and natural mother have no shared past and communication has to be practiced.