

Relationships Are the Key

AASK was founded in 1988, based on the belief that every child has a right to a permanent loving home. The focus was to find adoptive families for children in Arizona's foster care system. Although AASK continues to focus exclusively on supporting children in care, the agency has evolved in its understanding of how to best serve these children.

Soon after its founding, the agency realized many children in care are not in need of a permanent family but are in need of a foster family, so AASK developed a foster care program.

If you were all alone in the universe with no one to talk to, no one with which to share the beauty of the stars, to laugh with, to touch, what would be your purpose in life? It is other life; it is love, which gives your life meaning. This is harmony. We must discover the joy of each other, the joy of challenge, the joy of growth.

— Mitsugi Saotome,
Aikido Shihan & Author

Maximizing AASK's value meant it was necessary to further redefine its mission. Family is more than a legal status or where a child lives. It's about having strong, long lasting relationships. Having someone with whom to share birthdays, celebrate game-winning base hits or overcome fears. AASK redefined itself not as an adoption agency or a foster care agency but as a relationship agency. Once this purpose was understood, a mentoring

program was created to provide relationships to children in care who live in non-family settings like shelters and group homes.

It was necessary for AASK to evolve from an agency which provides programs to one that establishes relationships, because providing these children with relationships is the key to their success. Relationships actually shape the circuitry of a child's brain and lay the foundation for later developmental outcomes, from academic performance to mental health and interpersonal skills. They help children define who they are, what they can become and how and why they are important to others.

While relationships are crucial for every child, they are particularly difficult for children in care. Most children have a built-in support system of parents, relatives, neighbors and friends. This support system is rarely available to youth in foster care.

Unlike their peers, children in care have experienced very hurtful and negative life experiences caused by the very adults they have trusted. These experiences can lead children to impose barriers on future relationships. They have self-respect or self-worth issues and will more often push away positive influences compared to their peers. Many of these children reject the idea that anyone would want to care about them because too many people have broken their trust. They begin to believe they are the only ones they can truly count on. At a time when most children are worried about fitting in, they feel they are different than everyone else.

Providing these children with caring relationships is crucial. Introducing positive role models into their lives who know them, visit them, call them or ask about them because they want to (not because they are paid to) can be very powerful. A positive relationship with an adult boosts a child's self-esteem. They begin to understand they are worthy of having people in their lives not because they have to, but because they want to be there.

A positive relationship is also motivational. Children who feel they have unconditional support are willing to take more risks and dream bigger dreams. They are more willing to take such risks when someone will still love them even if they fail.

Every day, AASK's mentors, foster and adoptive parents are building strong relationships with children in care. They are literally changing the lives and futures of thousands of children. The relationships they've created with these children greatly impact their lives. Positive relationships helped Jasmine dream big enough to want to be the President of the United States one day. They helped Alexis graduate from high school and enroll in college. They taught Tyler how to trust.

Relating Matters will share these incredible everyday stories with you. There are over 16,000 children still in care today, and AASK mentors, adoptive and foster parents have already provided relationships to thousands of children like Jasmine, Alexis and Tyler. Together, we can help these children receive the loving, caring and dependable relationships they so deserve.