

Partnering With Birth Parents to Promote Reunification

The most successful foster caregivers understand their role goes beyond supporting the children in their care to supporting the children's families as a whole. Many factors may influence how you interact with a birth family, including your agency's approach and the supports and training you receive as a caregiver.

Children, youth, and families benefit when foster and birth parents are supported by an agency culture that encourages a meaningful partnership and that provides quality support.

Child Welfare Information Gateway conducted a series of interviews with birth and foster parents—many of whom are partnership advocates with either the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) or the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP)—to help dispel some of the myths each may hold about the other. This factsheet shares their advice and highlights the many opportunities to help children, youth, and families in need.

What follows are common themes and tips that emerged in our conversations with birth and foster parents on how attitudes, expectations, and child- and family-centered actions can affect outcomes for children and families.

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BUILDING CONNECTIONS FROM THE START

Making connections with birth parents as soon as possible and keeping communication open and honest from the start can help build a strong and ongoing partnership. Below, birth and foster parents discussed important points to consider along the way.

COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN. MORE IS BETTER. KEEP IT REAL.

When safe and if case plans allow, foster parents should meet birth parents as early as the initial day of placement to exchange essential information about the child and to help ease any worries about foster care. Try putting yourself in the birth parent's shoes and think about what you would want to know about the people caring for your child. Regular check-ins through emails, phone calls, texts, photo sharing, etc., can help birth parents feel closer to their children, build trust with you, and encourage reunification.

A birth parent who had been involved with child welfare and who is now a birth parent advocate talked about facilitating CHAT (Communicating History and Transition) meetings as a way to encourage communication. "It's a time for both parties to ask whatever questions they want. It's a safe environment. Some foster parents don't want to do it, because they already have a picture of how this (birth) parent is. I have pushed hard for [foster parents] to be able to have these CHATs so they can understand [the process] is all about reunification, and if they want adoption, they're in the wrong place. I love holding these meetings and making sure [birth] parent voices are heard. I ask what the [foster] parent needs from the birth parent and what the birth parent needs from the [foster] parent to have a successful transition to reunification."

"There should be an initial meeting to introduce the foster and the birth parents so they can ask the little questions. What is your child like? What are their sleeping hours? What are their dislikes? This can be a great opportunity for [birth parents] to see that the foster caregiver is really concerned about their child and doesn't want to replace them. It lets them know right off the bat that you are on their side." —Keely, foster parent, BFPP

"Before she even came to our home, I had the opportunity to speak with her mother on the phone to start building a relationship. She was able to ask me questions about my family. Looking back on it, I think that was pivotal to her feeling comfortable with the placement." —Beth, foster parent, BFPP

"I wish my extended family had been more involved when I was in care, and I wish there had been more conversations with caseworkers about my [noncustodial father]. I would have been so much more grounded and connected if I had been allowed to maintain these relationships." —Jeri, a young adult who experienced several foster placements

LEANING ON YOUR CASEWORKER AND AGENCY

Your caseworker can help you go beyond simply “checking the boxes” of a case plan to actively partnering toward reunification by promoting a positive relationship with the birth family. Caseworkers can help make sure birth parents get to know their foster caregivers. A recipe for success includes caseworkers, caregivers, and families who prioritize partnership.

“We tell the [birth] parents, ‘We’re going to follow the rules, but we don’t make them,’ and we encourage them to do the things they need to do to move to unsupervised visits. As we build trust with birth parents, we can advocate for unsupervised visits.” —Ellen, foster parent, BFPP

“When I had a supervisor or social worker where partnership was the goal, the case went really well. We were able to really connect and be together and the children were obviously much better. The chances of going home happened more often. Whoever is responsible for that relationship from the very first minute can make a difference with reunification.” —Roberta, foster parent, BFPP

“My visit supervisor was amazing. One day she was like, ‘This is ridiculous—you have never met the people caring for your child!’ I said, ‘No, never. I think they hate me.’ She thought we should meet. [When we met] that foster parent could look at me and see that I was a loving mother. [This] allowed me to know [my child] was okay so I could work on what I needed to work on. I couldn’t focus on anything until that happened.” —Julie, birth parent, BPNN

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND AND AN OPEN HEART

How child welfare professionals and foster care providers interact with the families they serve can have an impact on child and family well-being and chances for reunification. The points below reflect the importance of resisting the urge to judge.

CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM ALREADY HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS WHO LOVE THEM.

The children in your care are not with you because their parents don’t love them. They are with you because their parents or primary caregivers are struggling with a specific problem or need. Neglect may have occurred because the primary caregiver has challenges that, in most cases, can be overcome with the right support, treatment, and encouragement.

"The most dangerous thing I see is that black and white thinking of foster and adoptive parents 'saving' kids. These children are not orphans. They have families." —Amy, foster parent, BFPP

"One of my huge pet peeves is the language they use to recruit foster parents: 'These children just need some love.' These children *already* have love. They *already* have parents." —Roberta, foster parent, BFPP

"Know that [birth parents] want the best. They love their kids just like you love yours." —Sandra, birth parent, BPNN

A MOMENT IN TIME DOES NOT DEFINE A FAMILY.

Sometimes one heated moment can change lives, break up families, and have serious consequences for children or youth. Understanding that individuals are more than the sum of their mistakes or behaviors is important for moving forward.

"The incident between his mother and me was not only isolated but inflated with alcohol and drugs. That was not the [norm] for us." —Robert, birth parent, BPNN

"There was nothing wrong with my household and what we were doing as a family. We did have that 1-minute incident. You would come out of [family court] thinking, 'I must be an awful person.' I would carry this card that said, 'You will not be diminished by a 1-minute incident. You are a great mom.'" —Sandra, birth parent, BPNN

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW. KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.

There is a story behind the circumstances and actions that lead to child welfare involvement, and remember, there are two sides to every story. What you see may not represent that child's truth or the full extent of the child's family history.

“I don’t know who [the foster mother] thought I was. Obviously, she didn’t think very highly of me because of the way that she was relating to me. Who was telling her who I was? Who we are as a family? Who my kid was? Who his brother was? Not only had my son never been away from me, he had never been away from his brother.”—Sandra, birth parent, BPNN

“When I came to the [BFPP] conference and heard [birth parents] say what they thought of foster parents, I wanted to stand on the table and say, ‘No! I’m not standing in judgment of you. I’m definitely not trying to turn your child against you!’” —Keely, foster parent, BFPP

HELP, TRUST, AND EMPATHY MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

Birth parents don’t choose to be involved with child welfare. Their involvement may be a result of their circumstances or, in many cases, of their own history. Temporarily losing custody of a child can result in an emotional roller coaster of grief, anger, and guilt. Putting yourself in the birth parents’ shoes and asking yourself how you might feel in the same situation can give you an idea of what they might be going through and, more importantly, what they might need to be successful. You are most likely to build trust with birth parents when they believe you are trying to support them and understand how they feel—an essential part of any successful relationship.

“[Birth parents] are already so ashamed of themselves. They already feel like the most awful parent in the world. Just by saying ‘You’ve done a great job’ or ‘Your kids have a really great bond with you’ is really groundbreaking! Be the bigger person and take the first step. Be a part of family healing, and reach out in a very human way.” —Julie, birth parent, BFPP

“It would have been helpful if someone at the hospital had asked me if there was anything I needed, because I was desperate for change. Instead, there was no engagement and instead punitive words. It was the darkest time of my life. I needed someone to believe in me.” —Nancy, birth parent, BPNN

“[Birth parents] are scared and upset because you have their child. It takes a real strong person to say [to a birth parent], ‘I’m so sorry you’re angry. How can I help?’” —Linda, foster parent, BFPP

“I think empathy and compassion are key. If a [birth] parent read their bio to the foster parent, I think they would immediately have compassion.” —Julie, birth parent, BFPP

MAINTAINING CONTACT AFTER REUNIFICATION OR OTHER PERMANENCY

Strong partnerships between birth and foster families can continue long after families have been reunified or after an adoption or other permanency option has been achieved. This ongoing relationship can help increase important social connections for children, youth, and families as well as their sense of stability and belonging. It can also provide families with extended support (e.g., someone to call when a parent needs a word of encouragement, or a babysitter) that can help prevent further child welfare involvement.

“We see a lot of kids that have lived with us at different times and their families. [With one] child we had at one point, his grandmother still calls us, and we do all the babysitting whenever she needs help. We have another young adult who went back to her family, and she calls us almost every weekend. She had a baby, and we’re the godparents.” —Ellen, foster parent, BFPP

“One of the outcomes [of a birth-foster parent partnership] where maybe a baby is not going to go home is that it allows that child to keep everybody important in its life. On the flip side, where the babies have gone home, the birth mom can still call upon the foster caregivers for occasional help. They’re actually working together to raise these children.” —Julie, birth parent, BFPP

“Just last week a birth mom we had worked with reached out to me and asked if we could talk. She was very honest with me about some stress she was experiencing and just needed to talk to somebody before she found a support group. I was deeply honored that she trusted me enough to be that person she called in that moment.” —Beth, foster parent, BFPP

PARTNERSHIP RESOURCES

Everyone benefits when there are trusted professionals, neighbors, family members, and friends to call on for help with meals, tutoring, child care, and life’s inevitable ups and downs. When families have this type of extended moral support, they are less likely to require any additional involvement with child welfare or other agencies. Your caseworker can help you build a community of support for yourself and the children in your care and their families.

Active partnerships that support the reunification process can take time to develop. Fortunately, there are resources to help. Below is a list of organizations, publications, and websites or webpages to support your work.

ORGANIZATIONS

The **Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP)** (<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp>) supports birth families working together with foster and kinship care providers to strengthen families and promote reunification. BFPP is a partnership of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs.

The **Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)** (<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/>) promotes and champions birth parents as leaders and strategic partners in prevention and child welfare system reform.

Circle of Parents (<http://circleofparents.org>) provides a supportive environment to discuss the challenges of raising children.

Parents Anonymous (<http://www.parentsanonymous.org>) uses mutual support and shared leadership to empower, inspire, and create long-term positive change.

The **Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)** (<http://www.qpi4kids.org/>) is an approach as well as a network of sites dedicated to strengthening foster care with a focus on quality parenting. QPI seeks to define and raise expectations for foster care parenting, recruit and retain quality foster caregivers, and give caregivers a voice. QPI is an initiative of the Youth Law Center.

PUBLICATIONS

Birth Parents With Trauma Histories and the Child Welfare System: A Guide for Resource Parents provides tips that foster parents can use to understand how trauma may affect the way birth parents parent. (<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/birth-parents-trauma-histories-and-child-welfare-system-guide-resource-parents>)

Reunification: Bringing Your Children Home From Foster Care provides a general overview of the reunification process for families with children removed from their care. (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reunification/>)

Supporting Successful Reunifications explores strategies for achieving reunification and preventing reentry. (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/supporting-successful-reunifications/>)

WEB RESOURCES

The **Birth Parent/Foster Parent Relationships to Support Family Reunification** section of the Information Gateway website provides a list of useful resources. (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification/parents/reunification/>)

CFSA Family Link provides resources that promote foster parent-birth parent partnerships and is a project of the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center. (<https://cfsa.dc.gov/page/cfsa-family-link>)

The **Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center** provides trainings on shared parenting to address the concerns of foster, adoptive, and kinship parents in the District of Columbia. (<http://dcfapac.org/trainings.html>)

Resources for Parents With Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care provides a list of organizations and publications to help caregivers navigate foster care and the reunification process. (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/casework/parentcasework/parentresources/>)

The **Reunifying Families** section of the Information Gateway website provides a list of resources to support family reunification. (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification>)

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