

Equipping Foster Parents to Actively Support Reunification

Reunification with birth parents has consistently remained the primary permanency plan for children in foster care. Our child welfare system recognizes that children have a right to be raised in their families of origin if they can be safe in that environment, and designed a system to support that value.

Child welfare professionals work hard to recruit, engage, develop, and support the foster parents and kinship caregivers who will care for children who cannot remain safely with their birth parents. As part of that work, it is critically important to fully address the importance of foster parents' role in reunification. Our practices must effectively position foster parents to help work toward reunification—whenever reunification is the goal—and to feel supported after children return home.

Key questions

Key questions to explore when assessing your child welfare system's approach to preparing and supporting foster parents to help equip them to support reunification include:

- Does our messaging emphasize reunification as a system-wide value and priority?
- Are we adequately preparing resource parents to be partners in reunification?
How do we know whether we are effective at this?
- What skills and attitudes do foster families need to actively partner with birth parents? How are we developing these skills?
- How are we supporting foster parents through the challenges, complex dynamics, and grief and loss they will likely encounter as they take on this work?
- What feedback loops do we have in place to continue to learn from foster parents about what they need to be effective partners in reunification efforts?

Benefits of preparing and supporting foster parents

Partnering with foster parents in reunification efforts benefits children, birth parents, foster parents, and the child welfare system:

Children will have an increased likelihood of successfully reunifying with their birth families. They will also experience more consistent messages—both explicit and implicit—from the adults involved in their care and will see that their foster parents are a valuable support to their birth family.

Even when children cannot go back home, they will likely see that their foster parents were supportive of and respectful toward their birth parents, which can help the child develop a better sense of self and embrace connections with birth family members. A positive connection between birth and foster families can also help children avoid feeling divided loyalty, potentially easing the transition from foster home to permanent home.

Birth parents will have the skills and supports they need to successfully care for their children. Even if reunification doesn't happen, they will have the comfort of knowing who is taking care of their children.

Foster parents will see how they fit into the team of people working to achieve positive outcomes for children they are parenting and will feel better equipped to manage their many important roles as foster parents.

Foster parents will be better able to handle their own emotions and reactions during periods of transition—for example, when they experience complicated feelings of both loss and success when children return home. When foster parents are better prepared to cope with their own emotional challenges, they are more resilient caregivers and may be more likely to continue in their role as foster parents.

Child welfare systems will have additional assistance working toward achieving children's permanency goals and will likely experience reduced foster parent burnout and departure.

What does it look like when a foster parent actively supports reunification?

What do we mean when we talk about a foster parent supporting reunification?

Foster parents who *actively* support reunification understand that reunification is most often in the child's best interest, and are committed to doing what is best for the child, even if it in-

“ Creating space for relationship-building... will become transformational in the life of a parent, also in the life of a child... A house divided is no good for a child.”
—a birth parent

volves complexity or loss for the foster family. They are an engaged member of the team working toward reunification, and they have a clear role on that team. They embrace the approach of shared parenting, and they are committed to building a positive, child-focused relationship with the birth family. They see themselves as an important resource for the birth family, and they view the birth family as experts on the child's needs and care.

In contrast, a foster parent who *passively* supports reunification doesn't interfere with the achievement of the plan goal, but doesn't work toward it. They understand that foster care is temporary and that the system will seek to reunify the child with their family, but they don't see themselves as part of the team working toward that goal. They are committed to providing warm and loving care for the child, but they see this as the only role they play.

A foster parent's active support of reunification relies deeply on the engagement, development, and support that agencies provide. Our practices should be making our expectations clear and preparing foster parents to be engaged and committed partners who actively work toward the child's permanency goal.

Concurrent planning

While we ask foster parents to actively support and engage with a plan goal of reunification, we often simultaneously ask them to consider adopting children in cases where reunification is not possible. This can be a challenge for foster parents, who may feel they are being asked to prepare for two outcomes that appear to be in opposition to each other. For this reason, it's critical that agencies include comprehensive training on concurrent planning. Foster parents need to understand that there really is one unifying goal for each child—timely permanence—and that reunification is typically the first and best permanency goal. A comprehensive understanding of concurrent planning, and how plan goals shift based on the child's best interest, can help foster parents embrace a goal of reunification while simultaneously understanding that the circumstances of the case may necessitate a plan change down the road.

Tips to enable foster families to actively support reunification

Partnering with birth family to support reunification can be challenging. Foster parents are in critical need of support as they build and strengthen connections to the child's birth

family. You can make this easier by building practices and implementing policies that reinforce partnerships between birth and foster families and that effectively develop and support foster parents for their key role in supporting reunification:

- **Use consistent messaging in family recruitment, response, engagement, and orientation to convey the temporary nature of foster care and the role foster parents play.** Prospective foster parents are often hungry for information about the process, which gives you a great opportunity to share information about what their role would be. In the materials you provide to prospective parents, you can include data on the percentage of children in foster care who reunify with birth family and who are placed with relatives. At orientation, you can highlight how reunification, when appropriate, is in children’s best interest and that healthy partnerships with birth family help children thrive. Language choice matters tremendously as you try to set realistic expectations with prospective parents, so it’s also critical that your recruitment materials don’t undermine your message. Phrases such as “save a child” and references to “orphans” give the wrong impression about the role of foster parents and the importance of valuing birth families. In addition, staff and information shared should make it clear that pursuing foster parenting is not the same as pursuing adoption.

“ An amazing supervisor who encourages partnership is effective because of the language she uses. Her message to both the birth and foster parent is ‘I believe in both of you.’”

–a foster parent

- **Encourage positive attitudes towards birth families in your interactions with foster parents.** Foster parents’ feelings about birth parents and why their children came into care can affect their ability to effectively partner with birth parents in support of reunification. In every orientation, training, group session, and one-on-one interaction with prospective foster parents, you have an opportunity to positively affect their attitudes toward birth families. During pre-service and ongoing training, you can encourage foster parents to reflect on their feelings toward birth parents, and challenge narratives that reflect bias. Incorporate exercises into training, such as role play or written reflections, that encourage empathy for birth parents’ circumstances and highlight reunification success stories. You can also incorporate discussion topics into support groups that help foster parents focus on birth parent experiences. Perhaps most importantly, every worker who interacts with the family should speak about birth parents in positive terms. Ensure all staff are trained on how to speak with foster parents about birth families in ways that highlight strengths and encourage partnership.

- **Ensure training includes skills that foster parents need to support reunification.** Include concrete strategies in your pre-service and ongoing training that foster parents can use to build trust between themselves and birth parents. Be clear about what shared parenting looks like and what it can accomplish when it's done well. To effectively partner with birth families, foster parents need to have strong communication skills, including active listening skills and conflict management. Foster parents also need to have strong skills related to talking to the children in their care about their birth families, understanding that the manner in which foster parents speak about birth parents matters tremendously.
- **Incorporate birth parents and youth into your training curriculum.** Incorporating birth parents into your training can help to dispel myths and stereotypes and build empathy for birth parents, setting the stage for more successful partnerships between foster parents and birth parents. This can be especially valuable if you also include foster parents who successfully partnered with those birth parents to achieve their shared goal of reunification. In addition, have youth who are in or have been in foster care share their perspectives on the value of having their foster parents support reunification and partner with their birth family.
- **Provide opportunities for peer support from foster parents who have experience actively supporting reunification.** Foster parenting is challenging and no one understands that better than other foster parents. You can offer a foster parent support group led by an experienced foster parent or provide financial or material support to existing independent parent peer groups. Incorporate current or former foster parents who commit to and have experience in actively supporting reunification into your training and support programs.¹
- **Provide clear guidance and support on birth family contact and visitation.** The purpose of visitation is to maintain the bond between the birth parent and the child. Consistent contact with birth family is critical to supporting reunification, so special attention should be paid to educating foster parents about its importance. Visitation may also prompt stress in the foster parents, due to tension in the relationship with the birth family or challenging behavior from the child during or after visitation. Foster parents need support and guidance around visitation so they understand what to expect and are ready for possible challenges. They need to understand the reasons why children may have intense reactions after visits and that those reactions aren't an indication that visits shouldn't happen. In addition, if foster parents are expected to provide supervision or coaching during visitation, they will need specific training to build the skills necessary for that role, such as behavior modeling, healthy communication, and record-keeping. You can make visitation easier on everyone by

¹ For more information about providing peer support, read our tip sheet, *Providing Peer Support to Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families*, available at adoptuskids.org/for-professionals.

providing inviting and open meeting spaces, transportation, or material support for food or activities. If safe to do so, encourage visitation that is natural and informal, outside agency offices.

- **Offer enhanced support during periods of transition and loss.** When a child leaves a placement for a positive reason, such as reunification, it still represents a loss for the foster family. You should plan for any placement transition carefully, considering what the transition means for each party. Agencies should be prepared to enhance the supports they offer to the entire foster family (including other children in the home) when a child transitions out of their care. Before a child moves, match the transitioning family with another family who has been through it so they can provide peer support. You can also provide specific support groups for families transitioning a child out of their home or specific training on grief and loss.

- **Incorporate feedback and data analysis to improve your services.** Current and former foster parents, birth parents, and youth know best if your services are effective and if they meet their needs. By gathering their feedback—for example, through regular needs assessments, surveys, or exit interviews—you can better understand if your system is adequately preparing and supporting foster families to be partners in reunification. Use the information you glean from current or former foster parents to improve the training and support that you provide to prospective parents. For example, if survey responses reveal that many foster parents did not know that they would be playing an involved role in visitation with birth family, make changes to your training curriculum to address that omission. Further, by analyzing the available data—reunification rates, time to permanence, or foster parent longevity—you can better understand if your services are having the impact they are designed to have. If analysis reveals that your services are not having the intended effect, use that information to make systemic changes to better meet families' needs.²

“ Get creative to allow longer and more frequent visits. More in-depth visits, like going for ice cream instead of sitting in a room where it’s awkward. It’s easier on the kids and they don’t have to feel bad being happy to go with the foster parents. It feels safe because they see their parents and foster parents working together. It’s natural, the same way it would be with a grandma or an aunt. It’s more authentic so the kids don’t have to feel like they’re living two lives.”

—a foster parent

² For more information about program evaluation, read our tip sheet, *Evaluating Family Support Programs*, available at adoptuskids.org/for-professionals.

- **Give special consideration to kinship caregivers.** Child welfare systems are increasingly relying on relative caregivers to meet their placement needs. The strengths and needs of this population of resource parents are unique and should be given special consideration in the development and support that you provide. Consider providing additional or tailored training for this group, highlighting the skills that are especially necessary for relative caregivers, such as boundary setting and managing shifting family dynamics. In addition, what may be an appropriate expectation of non-relative foster parents—such as supervising visitation—may not be appropriate or may need to be modified for kinship caregivers, given existing family relationships. Consider offering a peer-to-peer support group specifically for kinship caregivers. Kinship navigator programs can also be a tremendous support to relative caregivers who are managing unique circumstances that come with their role.

From the field—Washoe County, Nevada³

As part of their participation as a Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)⁴ site, Washoe County sought to make its entire child welfare system more child-focused. This required that administrators, staff, and community stakeholders take a holistic approach and make changes to policy and practice across program areas. Below, we focus on how they shifted their approach to the development and support of foster families and to visitation to better prepare foster families to actively support reunification.

Orientation

Administrators realized that, to be child-focused, there was a significant need to discuss the importance of reunification early, as prospective foster parents began to interact with their system. Beginning at orientation, staff now highlight the key role that foster parents play in whether reunification will be successful. Staff also introduce the various paths that families can take at orientation—fostering, adopting, mentoring, or volunteering—while emphasizing that those that choose the fostering path should be committed to supporting reunification. They encourage self-assessment to begin at this early stage as families consider which path is right for them.

Pre-service training

Washoe County also changed its model of pre-service training to devote more time to birth-parent visitation, shared parenting, and the role that foster parents play in making reunification successful. While reunification had always been discussed in pre-service training, the agency now positions reunification as the cornerstone of the foster care system and shared

³ Source: Mikie Franklin and Jesse Brown, interview, January 28, 2019

⁴ The Quality Parent Initiative (QPI) is a strategy of the Youth Law Center in San Francisco, California. For more information about the Quality Parenting Initiative, visit qpi4kids.org.

parenting as an important method to achieve reunification. Pre-service and ongoing training now also examine the value of visitation in maintaining the bond between children and their birth parents, and how foster parents' engagement in visitation helps to strengthen the partnership between birth parents and foster parents.

Foster parent liaisons

From their first interaction with the child welfare system in Washoe County, prospective foster parents are guided by liaisons who help them access training, complete their paperwork, and answer any questions they have. These staff remain available to foster parents after placement if they aren't sure how to access a specific service that their child or family needs.

Family Engagement Center

In 2017, Washoe County opened the Family Engagement Center for the purpose of improving the quality of visitation between birth parents and children. Five staff, called engagers, serve 50 to 60 families each. Engagers coordinate visits and help to ensure they are interactive, meaningful, and child focused. Having staff dedicated to managing visitation has helped to prioritize visitation in all cases involving out-of-home placement across the county.

The center is a large building with many open spaces, kitchens where families can prepare meals together, and a lot of outdoor space. All visitors wear color-coded name badges so staff know about special considerations—for example, if their visit needs to be supervised.

Visitation as a separate part of the case

In a significant policy change, Washoe County reframed birth parent visitation to be a completely separate part of the case that was not dependent on how well birth parents were doing in other parts of their case plan. Visitation was no longer treated as an incentive for birth parents, nor was it canceled when birth parents weren't meeting expectations. Agency visitation policy was rewritten to be child-centered, focusing on the power of positive visitation and the impact it can have on child wellbeing and on behavior. This shift in philosophy meant that more children were visiting with their birth parents, and the Family Engagement Center and its staff ensured that those visits were safe and meaningful. In addition, while engagers document if visits take place, watch for trends in visitation patterns in families, and alert social workers about any safety concerns, they do not document the detailed interactions of the visits. This helps all parties to feel more at ease during visits, and leaves everyone to fully engage with the child.

Shift in foster parent expectations

In pre-service training and in ongoing contact with foster parents, staff continually communicate that foster parents are expected to transport children to visits and join in visitation with

the birth parents whenever possible. Staff are consistent in messaging to foster parents that participating in visitation provides an opportunity to better understand the child's relationship with their birth parents. Foster parents can see firsthand the bond between birth parents and their children and engage with birth parents on how best to provide care for the child while they are in their home. In addition, transporting the child provides opportunities to talk with the child about the visit and process how they felt about it. While staff can transport the child to visitation in limited circumstances, such as illness or last-minute schedule changes, staff have found that setting this expectation has led to more foster parents actively engaging in visitation.

Opportunities for peer support

Each foster parent can access a mentor as they near the end of pre-service training. Mentors are former or current experienced foster parents who volunteer their time to help new foster parents navigate the challenges of foster parenting. Mentors encourage foster parents to partner with birth families, giving them tips on how to achieve a successful partnership. Foster parents report that having a mentor to call on helps them work through frustrations and keeps them focused on what's best for the child in their care. Staff also host several in-person monthly support groups for foster parents. Child care is provided during groups, giving both parents and children an opportunity for respite and peer connection.

From the field—Project Revive, New Mexico

Project Revive was a statewide support project operated by La Familia, Inc., that sought to help foster parents in New Mexico normalize and recognize the grief their families encounter as part of being involved with the foster care system. The project recognized that often the successes in foster parenting result in some form of loss for the foster family—such as when children reunify with birth family. The following services were provided to foster parents and children in foster care throughout the state to address the need for grief and loss education and support:

Training on grief and loss

Project Revive offered three-hour trainings on grief several times per year around the state. Parents were able to attend as often as they like. Childcare and credit for training hours were provided. The grief and loss curriculum was designed to:

- Share up-to-date and accurate information about grief and loss and the foster parent experience.
- Inform attendees about how foster families, caseworkers, and children interact and the way that grief and loss affect those communications.

- Help current foster parents explore how their own unresolved grief and loss affects the way they parent children they are fostering.

Support groups

The project also offered activity-based support groups for foster parents and all children in the family. Through these groups, foster parents and children in foster care had separate meetings where they learned about grief and loss and had the opportunity to explore, process, and integrate difficult and confusing experiences. Child care was provided for children who were too young to attend the youth support groups.

Telephone helpline

Regional family advocates were available to provide information and support to other parents in their region by phone. Advocates were foster parents themselves with at least five years of experience.

Private Facebook group

Parents shared information and supported one another through a private Facebook group, which was monitored by program staff.

Additional resources on supporting reunification

Search for these resources at Child Welfare Information Gateway's website, childwelfare.gov:

- *Partnering With Birth Parents to Promote Reunification*
- *Supporting Successful Reunifications*

More publications on engaging, developing, and supporting resource families are available at adoptuskids.org/for-professionals.

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.



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