



# How Judges Can Support Family Reunification through Parent–Resource Parent Partnerships

ABA Center on Children and the Law

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

## Quick Overview

This alert highlights:

- ✓ benefits of parent–resource parent partnerships
- ✓ key elements of successful parent–resource parent partnerships
- ✓ how parent partners can help bridge the gap between parents and resource parents
- ✓ how judges can support parent–resource parent partnerships
- ✓ practical resources to help you understand and implement this approach

Something profound happens when parents and resource parents work together and support one another during child welfare system involvement. The parent knows the person who is caring for their child and feels supported while working towards reunification. The resource parent learns about the child from the person who knows the child best. The child sees the parent and resource parent working together and feels less conflicted, knowing they are on the same page and want the family to reunite.

A shift in child welfare is strengthening the relationship between parents and resource parents so they support one another and work together towards family reunification when that is the goal. The approach aligns with the federal Children's Bureau's focus on keeping families together.<sup>1</sup> As a judge presiding over child welfare legal proceedings, you can help support these partnerships as an approach to promoting family reunification.

## What is a resource parent?

“Resource parent” refers to an out-of-home caregiver (relative or kin caregiver or a foster parent/family) for a child in the child welfare system. A resource parent sees their role as serving as a support for the family and incorporates the child's family members into life events and caregiving activities.

## Benefits of parent–resource parent partnerships.

Many benefits emerge when parents and resource parents support one another and share a common goal of reunification for the family.

*For parents, children, families*

- **Lessens the trauma of removal and separation for the child and parent.** Family separation is emotional and traumatic for children and parents, and both experience tremendous loss and uncertainty. Forging a positive,

supportive relationship between the parent and resource parent from the start of the case helps alleviate uncertainty and fears around the child's care, the resource parent's motives, and case goals. The child feels less conflicted about having a relationship with the resource parent and parent and about what the future holds.<sup>2</sup>

- **Focuses on healing and restoring the family.** When the parent feels the resource parent is an ally who wants to help the family reunify, the parent can

focus on healing and addressing the issues needed to have their child return. It also allows the resource parent to play a role in the family's healing, a support that can assist the parent to work through challenges and stay engaged.<sup>3</sup>

- **Provides consistent, quality parenting to help children thrive.** Children receive consistent messages from the adults involved in their care. By involving the parent in the child's life and caregiving, the resource parent can maintain parenting practices that are familiar and meaningful to the child while also working with the parent to incorporate new ones to strengthen their relationship and parenting.<sup>4</sup>
- **Models positive, collaborative adult relationships for the child.** The child is surrounded by adults who are working towards the same goal, mutually supporting one another, maintaining clear roles, and demonstrating a positive relationship.<sup>5</sup>
- **Augments the parent's caregiving knowledge and skills.** The parent co-parents the child with the resource parent. The parent continues to have a parenting relationship with the child, using the parenting knowledge and skills the parent already has while also being exposed to appropriate parenting approaches the resource parent uses. As the two work together, they learn from one another and serve as sounding board on parenting challenges. In time, this collaborative approach builds and expands on the parent's caregiving knowledge and skills.<sup>6</sup>

### **Promotes safe, successful, timely family reunification.**

Parent–resource parent partnerships that are focused on family reunification support the legal requirement that child welfare agencies make reasonable efforts to safely reunify families. The chances of successful reunification increase when the parent and resource parent work together in a supportive way.<sup>7</sup>

- **Promotes child safety and well-being.** This approach builds the parent's protective capacity to avoid future child maltreatment, which aligns with the Children's Bureau's focus on preventing further child abuse and neglect.<sup>8</sup>
- **Eases the transition to other permanency options when reunification cannot happen.** Even if reunification does not happen, the parent knows who is caring for the child and that the child is receiving quality care. This can help ease the transition to another permanency option.<sup>9</sup>

*For parents and resource families*

- **Reframes foster care as a support service for families.** A mutual understanding exists between the parent and resource parent that the child's out-of-home placement is temporary, and both are moving towards helping the child return home as soon as possible.<sup>10</sup>
- **Fosters trust and positive relationships between the parent and resource parent.** Parents and resource parents are on the same side, working towards the same goal. They learn to trust one another, which leads

to positive interactions and experiences that allow them to work together toward reunification. They are better able to set and maintain a consistent schedule for family time/visits and other services and activities that support reunification.<sup>11</sup>

- **Improves parent engagement.** The ongoing support and involvement of the resource parent in the parent's life makes it easier for the parent to feel comfortable taking and maintaining an active role in co-parenting and working towards reunification.<sup>12</sup>
- **Reduces or eliminates tension and conflict between the parent and resource parent.** Parents do not worry that the resource parent wants to take their child away. Resource parents do not worry that the parent distrusts them and their care. As allies, the parent and resource parent have more positive experiences that result in productive interactions that strengthen the family.<sup>13</sup>
- **Allows the resource parent to learn directly from the parent about the child's history, strengths, and needs, which improves the resource parent's caregiving.**<sup>14</sup>

### **Key elements of successful parent–resource parent partnerships**

The following elements help create successful parent–resource parent partnerships.

- **Child welfare agency actively supports parent–resource parent partnerships and creates support at all levels of the system.** Resource family recruitment and training

must stress the collaborative, reunification-focused approach of these partnerships and gain commitment from individuals and families to this approach. The agency must also gain support from the broader child welfare community—courts and the legal community, service providers, education and health care systems, and organizations and individuals who touch families’ lives.<sup>15</sup>

- **Parents’ and children’s advocates support parent–resource parent partnership.** Advocates for the parent and child can help ensure the partnership is in their clients’ interests and that the partnership is working as it should. They can ask clients about the day-to-day interactions between the parent

and resource parent, identify challenges and successes, and advocate for changes when needed.<sup>16</sup>

- **Resource parent and parent commit to working together towards reunifying the family.** The parent needs to trust that the resource parent will provide the best care possible for the child while supporting the parent and family’s efforts to reunify. The resource parent needs to be open to including the parent in the child’s life and work with the parent to strengthen their parenting and work towards the child’s return home.<sup>17</sup>
- **Resource parent co-parents the child with the parent.** Resource parents support the parent and give them

opportunities to co-parent in a safe, supportive environment. Resource parents are committed to helping parents expand their parenting knowledge and skills, while respecting the knowledge and skills they already have as parents. Parents watch and learn from resource parents and have opportunities to practice new parenting approaches. The parent and resource parent communicate openly and clearly.<sup>18</sup>

- **Parent shares information about child with resource parent.** The parent helps the resource parent understand the child better, sharing insights that only a parent can provide about the child’s early history, family background, and current needs. The resource

## How Parent Partners Can Bridge the Gap between Parents and Resource Parents

Parent representation offices with multidisciplinary teams often include parent partners or parent advocates as part of the team. Parent partners have navigated the child welfare system themselves as parents and have firsthand experience that allows them to connect with and relate to parents. This helps them foster a relationship between the parent and resource parent.

**Working with parents.** By listening to parents, helping them understand the resource parent’s role and the goals of the partnership, and hearing and addressing their concerns, parent partners gain parents’ buy-in and openness to the approach. Key roles include:

- assuring the parent about the resource parent’s desire to support reunification, which fosters trust in their relationship.
- assuring the parent about the resource parent’s experience and ability to provide quality care for the child during the child’s removal and explains how the parent will still be involved in parenting the child.
- arranging services and connecting parents with activities that help them stay present in their children’s lives, such as school activities, doctor’s appointments, and family time.

- serving as an example for parents when challenges arise and reunification seems difficult to achieve.<sup>25</sup>

**Working with resource parents.** Parent partners also support the resource parent and help mediate and build their relationship with the parent.

- sharing case details, as appropriate, with the resource parent and facilitating regular contact starting early in the case.
- sharing new information and case developments with the resource parent as they happen (e.g., changes in visitation) and advising how to address them with the parent.
- working with resource parents to provide a positive support network for the parent
- advocate for the parent as a united front with the resource parent.<sup>26</sup>

parent honors the parent's role in the child's life by incorporating parenting traditions and using insights the parent shares to enhance the child's care.<sup>19</sup>

- **A clear process for resolving conflict exists.** The parent and resource parent understand that disagreements and conflicts are normal and expected. Rather than let them derail the relationship and progress in the case, they are encouraged to work through them together through a clear conflict resolution process.<sup>20</sup>

### How can judges support parent–resource parent partnerships?

Judges can support parent–resource parent partnerships at the community level and in court. Some steps to take include:

*In the child welfare community:*

- ✓ **Help create a culture that views resource parents as a support for families.** Your community may support parent–resource parent partnerships already or the approach may be new. You can help create a culture that supports the approach at all stages of development by working with the child welfare agency to support the role of resource families in supporting reunification. Join or convene stakeholder workgroups aimed at creating a new vision for the role of resource caregivers in your community.<sup>21</sup>
- ✓ **Ask about the agency's efforts to identify and prepare resource parents who will serve as a support for the family.** Does the agency

have policies and practices that support parent–resource parent partnerships? Does the agency educate and train resource parents to support the family's efforts to reunify? Does the agency have clear guidelines for parent–resource parent partnerships? Does the agency work with parents and resource parents to address challenges and ensure the relationship is productive?

*At hearings:*

- ✓ **Prioritize kin and relative caregiver placements for children who are removed from their parents.** Build on families' relationships and built-in support networks as a strength in supporting the parent toward reunification. Ensure clear guidance is in place to support partnerships between parents and kin and relative caregivers. Recognize the unique relationship they share going into the partnership and ensure they have added support and training from the agency to help them stay engaged and work towards reunification.<sup>22</sup>
- ✓ **Encourage positive relationships between resource parents and parents that prioritize mentoring, social support, and shared parenting.** Explore what supports and tools are needed to facilitate relationships (programs, trainings). Recognize parents' and caregivers' reservations about building relationships and working toward reunification together and strategize ways to overcome them.
- ✓ **Encourage liberal family time arrangements, including**

### **virtual contact between the parent and child in between the in-person family time.**

Encourage resource parents to invite the parent to family gatherings/birthday celebrations/holidays when appropriate and ask the resource parent to keep the parent informed of school events and medical appointments so the parent can join. Encourage virtual contact to allow the parent and child to connect when in-person contact is not possible and to allow for spontaneous, unscheduled time together.<sup>23</sup>

- ✓ **When a supportive parent-caregiver relationship exists, ask the parent about their relationship with the resource parent.** Does the resource parent support the parent during visits with the child, mentor the parent and offer support to improve parenting, give the parent opportunities to share in parenting tasks? What is going well? What needs to change?
- ✓ **Invite resource parents to speak about their work with the parent.** If the resource parent works with a parent partner, invite the parent partner to speak with the resource parent at the hearing about their joint work with the parent.
  - Ask about any changes and progress the parent has made.
  - Ask about the parent's relationship with the child. Is regular family time happening and is it meaningful and working towards reunification? Does the parent have opportunities

## Key Resources

### Organizations:

**Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)** promotes and champions birth parents as leaders and strategic partners in prevention and child welfare system reform.

**Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP)** is a national organization formed in 2016 to help birth parents, foster families, and kinship care providers build connections and transform systems, policies, and practices to improve permanency outcomes for children and families.

### Webinars/Videos:

Building Partnerships Between Parents and Caregivers: A Community-Based Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Strengthening Families, December 1, 2020. Presentation Slides

Family Connections: Yuvia's Story, February 2021. Excellent video showing how a mother and foster parent formed a supportive caregiving relationship and kept family relationships intact during the child's time in foster care.

### Written Materials:

AdoptUSKids. *Equipping Foster Parents to Actively Support Reunification*, May 2019.

Administration for Children Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (ACYF-CB). IM-20-06: Foster Care as a Support to Families, April 29, 2020.

Children's Trust Fund Alliance. *BPNN Tools to Build Birth and Foster Parent Relationships*, 2020. Three tools include an executive summary and two guides, one to help parents and resource parents build strong relationships, and another to help institutions implement policies and practices to support these relationships.

Casey Family Programs. "How can birth and foster parent partnerships help families reunify?" *Bright Spot Supportive Communities*, November 2018.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Partnering with Birth Parents to Promote Reunification*, May 2019.

Ivers, Lexi. "Parent Partners: Resources for Individuals, Teams and Systems." Washington, DC: ABA Center on Children and the Law, undated

for shared parenting with the resource parent?

- Ask about the permanency plan and its appropriateness.

✓ **For families that reunify, support postreunification engagement between the resource parent and parent.** Ongoing contact maintains the relationships that have been established between the child, parent, and resource parent and can help stabilize the reunification, especially early in the transition.<sup>24</sup>

✓ **Recognize successful parent-resource parent partnerships.** Offer an encouraging word and recognize the things that are going well. Hearing from the judge can affirm the parent's and resource parent's efforts and motivate them to continue working together towards reunification.

Together, parents and resource parents can form a powerful team working to achieve successful family reunification. Both can contribute valuable insights and skills and build on them to grow and strengthen the relationship and their caregiving of the child. Supporting these partnerships in your community through collaborative efforts and establishing a courtroom culture that prioritizes them in family reunification efforts can help them succeed.

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## Endnotes

1. Administration for Children Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (ACYF-CB). IM-20-06: Foster Care as a Support to Families, April 29, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Partnering with Birth Parents to Promote Reunification*, May 2019.
4. Casey Family Programs. "How Can Birth and Foster Parent Partnerships Help Families Reunify?" *Bright Spot Supportive Communities*, November 2018.
5. AdoptUSKids. *Equipping Foster Parents to Actively Support Reunification*, May 2019.
6. Casey Family Programs, November 2018; *See also* Children's Trust Fund Alliance. *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide*, 2020.
7. ACYF-CB, April 29, 2020.
8. Ibid.
9. AdoptUSKids. May 2019.
10. ACYF-CB, April 29, 2020.
11. Casey Family Programs, November 2018.
12. ACYF-CB, April 29, 2020.
13. Casey Family Programs, November 2018.
14. Ibid.
15. AdoptUSKids. May 2019.
16. Birth Parent National Network. Webinar: Building Partnerships between Parents and Caregivers, December 1, 2020.
17. Casey Family Programs, November 2018.
18. Ibid; Children's Trust Fund Alliance, 2020.
19. Ibid.
20. Birth Parent National Network. Webinar: Building Partnerships between Parents and Caregivers, December 1, 2020.
21. *See* ACYF-CB-IM-20-06 for specific steps to take; For guidance on policy and practice changes to create a culture shift, *see* Children's Trust Fund Alliance. *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation*, 2020.
22. *See* ACYF-CB, April 29, 2020 for specific guidance on supporting kin/relative caregivers who serve as resource parents.
23. *See* ABA Center on Children and the Law and National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. *Supporting Remote Family Time During the Pandemic and Beyond: The Judge's Role*, forthcoming.
24. Child Welfare Information Gateway, May 2019.
25. Ivers, Lexi. "Parent Partners: Resources for Individuals, Teams and Systems." Washington, DC: ABA Center on Children and the Law, undated; ACYF-CB, April 29, 2020.
26. Child Welfare Information Gateway, May 2019.