

Resource Family Tip Sheet for Supporting Reunification

Reunification is the most common outcome for youth in out-of-home care and foster parents can be one of the most important resources to help children reunify with their families. This Reunification Month, the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law spoke with foster families who were outstanding supporters of reunification to gather their insights on this topic. These resource families were recommended by state and tribal child welfare agencies. Many thanks to the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at AdoptUSKids for helping to connect with resource families, to the state and tribal agencies in Alabama, New Jersey, Oregon, Osage Nation, and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community who recommended resources families to interview, and to the resource families who generously set aside time to speak with us.

What follows are the tips and themes shared by these families.

Themes

- Respect birth parents and be compassionate
- Encourage visitation and regular contact
- Communicate with the family regularly
- Remember that safe reunification is best for the children



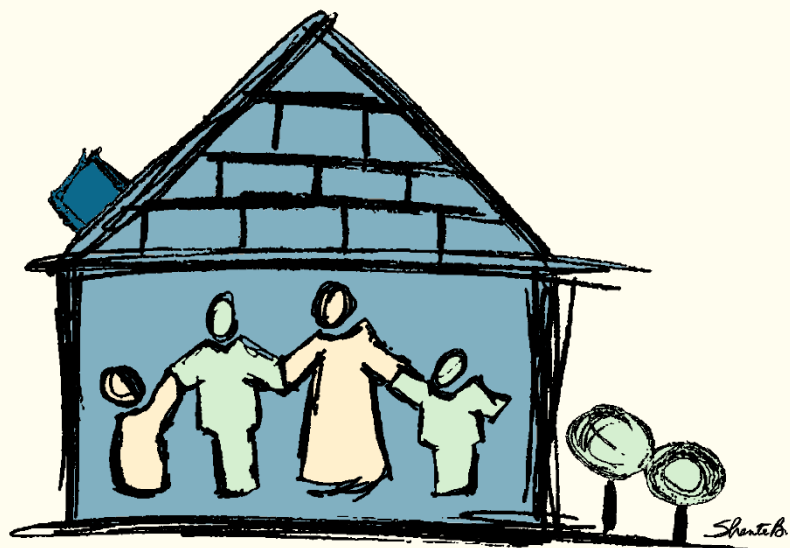
June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm

Respect the Birth Parents and Be Compassionate

Across the board, the resource families we interviewed emphasized the importance of respecting parents from the start. Several said to treat birth parents not only with respect but with love. Many of our supporters highlighted the cyclical nature of dependency cases. A resource parent from Oregon said, "Often times in foster care, parents are villainized and judged. Foster parents need to love them and never make them feel like they are being judged. We need to encourage them and become cheerleaders for them."

Among the practical tips to show your respect and compassion, resource families suggested:

- Express genuine concern
- Be honest with birth parents
- Let the family know that your goal is to help them get their children back
- Understand how scared they are and try to alleviate it
- Refer to birth parents using parental terms such as "Mom" or "Dad" when with their children and ask your foster kids to call you by another name
- Believe people can change
- Assume that things will go well
- Understand that the families often have different life experience than you
- Look for ways to break down barriers
- See birth parents as people and help them as people
- Look for positives
- Act as a support for family



Encourage Visitation (Parenting or Family Time) and Regular Contact

Many of the resource parents stated that visitation is an opportunity not only for parenting, but to improve the relationship between the foster family and birth family. When physical visitation is limited by court order or scheduling, the resource families suggested having regular phone contact between parents and their children. When physical visitation is not limited, the resource parents said it was best for both the children and the birth parents to have as much visitation as possible.

Some practical ways resource families encouraged visitation and contact include:

- Advocating for increased visitation whenever safe
- Encouraging children to have phone calls with family, especially during the week and multiple times per week
- Helping children video chat with their birth parents and family members
- Inviting families to community events for visitation where the birth parents and children can act like a family and do activities when it is safe to do so
- Transporting the parents or children to visitation when possible or safe to do so
- Sending children with everything they might need on a visit such as games, snacks, and activities they can do with their parents; meeting spots can be boring

Communicate with the Family Regularly

The resource families we interviewed said that knowledge is power. Birth parents need to know what is going on with their children and foster parents need to know the children and family's background. A resource parent from Osage Nation/Oklahoma said, "Birth parents are the experts on their kids."

The resource families offered these tips to maintain communication with the birth family:

- Ask parents about life before and the history of the children
- Involve parents or other family members in school functions/meetings
- Stay in constant contact; tell them it's ok to call any time
- Send pictures, photos, art projects, grades, etc. with the children to visits
- Have as many early conversations with parents as possible
- Transport kids to visits rather than using transporters if you are able
- Show an interest, not just in the child, but in the family as a whole
- Go to doctor appointments and other meetings together
- Include birth parents in decisions

Remember that Safe Reunification is Best for the Children

To a person, the resource families we interviewed stated that keeping families together was better for the children. Each supporter focused not only on the parent's need for their children but the children's need to be with their parents and families whenever possible.

Resource families discussed their attitudes towards reunification and what they wish each foster family was taught during training:

- Reunification is the first and best option
- It is comforting for the kids to know that the foster parents understand that the kids want to be with their birth parents
- Foster families need to try to get children back where they belong, with their families
- Supporting reunification is a must
- Foster families should have a deep, strong belief that families should be together
- Family units are important; parents should have their children when at all possible
- Agencies and foster families need to prioritize reunification over adoption when possible
- Foster parents need to be on board with reunification from the beginning
- As long as the family is trying, it's always better to focus on reunification
- Remember it's not all about the foster parent, it's about the child's best interest
- Everyone needs some training about reunification

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