

# BIRTH AND FOSTER PARENT PARTNERSHIP: A Relationship Building Guide



JUNE 2020

*Practical tips to help create and sustain positive lasting relationships between birth families, foster families and kinship caregivers to best support the children and youth in their care.*

## Acknowledgements

A publication of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, created with parents, in collaboration with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative and Casey Family Programs.

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**Youth Law Center** is a public interest law firm that works to protect children in the nation's foster care and justice systems from abuse and neglect, to ensure they receive the necessary support and services and maintain ties to their families and communities whenever possible so that they become healthy and productive adults. The Quality Parenting Initiative is Youth Law Center's approach to strengthening foster and kinship care.

<http://www.ylc.org>



**Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)** is an approach to strengthening foster care, refocusing on excellent parenting for all children in the child welfare system. QPI is creating a movement to transform foster care through a network of families, youth, agency leaders, judicial leaders, agency staff, and community organizations committed to developing and sharing results-based solutions, advocating for and implementing policy and practice changes, and changing the culture of child welfare to focus on the QPI goal of excellent parenting for every child and youth in care.

[qpi4kids.org](http://qpi4kids.org)



**Children's Trust Fund Alliance** is a membership organization that provides support to state children's trust and prevention funds and strengthens their efforts to prevent child maltreatment. The Alliance members invest more than \$200 million each year in prevention strategies for families. The Alliance also works with national partners, state organizations, parents, federal agencies and others to impact policies, practices, systems changes and trainings. Through the Alliance National Parent Partnership Council and the Birth Parent National Network, the Alliance has elevated the voice of parents and others with life experience in child maltreatment.

[ctfalliance.org](http://ctfalliance.org)



### **Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)**

**Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)**, is a national platform for birth parents to work in partnership with organizations and policymakers to share their life experiences and make recommendations to improve policies and practices that impact children and families. BPNN's goal is to strengthen and support families and improve outcomes for families at risk or involved with the child welfare system. The dynamic network includes hundreds of parent and organizational members. To make a difference locally, in your state or at the national level, join the BPNN.

[ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn)



**Casey Family Programs** is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America. Casey Family Programs works in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and two U.S. territories and with more than a dozen tribal nations to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families and the communities where they live.

<http://www.casey.org>

*“There are many pathways to creating connections and partnerships with families. In recognizing the various needs of families, child welfare systems and communities are embarking on innovative ways to partner with one another. These partnerships entail families, communities and systems coming together with the primary goal of supporting and strengthening children and families.”*

**Shrounda Selivanoff, birth parent (Washington)**

Shrounda turned her life around and was reunited with her daughter more than 10 years ago. Today, she is spearheading an effort to build a statewide birth and foster parent partnership in Washington. She is a Social Services Worker with the Washington State Office of Public Defense.



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ON THE COVER: Georgia Parent Advisory Council (PAC) created and shared inspirational rocks during an orientation for new members. The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) developed the council composed of birth and foster parents to ensure strong parent voices are included in shaping programs and policies that respond to the needs of Georgia’s families and communities and prevent child maltreatment. Children’s Trust Fund Alliance provided training and technical assistance to support DFCS in developing the council. Learn more about how the Alliance engages parents in the decision-making process to make a difference in the lives of children and families at [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/training-and-technical-assistance](https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/training-and-technical-assistance).

*“We don’t expect it to be a perfect relationship right from the start. I know that we are strangers, but I hope that we will become friends.”*

**Robyn Robbins, foster parent  
(California)**

A foster parent for 17 years, Robyn shares how she initially talks with birth parents to help build a relationship.

A family support advocate, Robyn is part of the Sonoma County Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, a team effort co-founded with her parent-mentor Jody Rodgers.



*“As parents the hardest thing in the world to face is not being able to meet the needs of our children and having to ask for help. We go back and forth in our thinking – should I pick up the phone and ask for help? Will you judge me for asking? Are going to call child protective services? All we want to do is provide for our children.”*

**Kimberly Mays, birth parent  
(Washington)**

Kimberly lost custody of nine of her ten children and they have all reunited with her as adults. Kimberly now has a Master’s Degree in Social Work and was instrumental in starting the first parent-for-parent program in Washington. She is a Social Services Worker with the Washington State Office of Public Defense, and a caregiver for relative and non-relative foster youth.



## Introduction

It is always better for children and youth to remain with their birth families if it is safe to do so. When foster care is necessary, the goal is to provide a temporary safe, stable and nurturing environment for children and adolescents while actively seeking and supporting reunification with their families. A robust relationship between a child or youth’s birth parents and foster parents or kinship caregivers can help achieve this outcome and reduce trauma for everyone. These relationships are best nurtured when child welfare staff, parent partners, court and legal personnel, court advocates, foster parent organizations and other service providers are supportive and help facilitate early and ongoing communication.

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) was formed in 2016 to support birth parents, foster families, kinship caregivers and staff in improving relationships, building connections and using their collective voices to transform systems, culture, policies and practices to improve outcomes for children and families. The partnership is being managed through a collaboration between Children’s Trust Fund Alliance (formerly known as the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds), Youth Law Center’s Quality Parenting Initiative and Casey Family Programs. As a collective group, the partnership is working together to accomplish the following goals:

- Identify strategies to help birth parents, foster parents and kinship caregivers work together to keep children and youth safe at home whenever possible and to facilitate reunification and prevent re-entry when foster care is necessary.
- Increase involvement of birth parents, foster parents and kinship caregivers in advocacy for improved policies and practices that benefit families, children and youth.
- Change culture and practice in child welfare systems to recruit and retain foster parents and kinship caregivers eager to and capable of partnering with birth parents.

Children and youth are most likely to benefit and thrive when the important adults in their lives cooperate with each other and share responsibilities and decision-making. Through the BFPP, we are working to promote lasting relationships between birth and foster parents and kinship caregivers to support families and to help child welfare systems improve their practices around supporting these relationships. In 2019, birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers from across the country worked with the Children’s Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center and Casey Family Programs to create two complementary documents – one that is most useful for birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers working to build and sustain relationships and another that is most useful for staff and administrators working to create systems that will best support these partnerships.

### *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide*

If you are a birth parent, foster parent or kinship caregiver, you can use this guide to help build respectful and supportive relationships with one another to best meet the needs of the children or youth in care, strengthen their families and support reunification and post reunification and other alternative placements. If you are a staff member or parent partner, we hope you will introduce this guide to birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers as you work with them. In addition, we know that all families have a

culture and traditions that they follow. It is important to know, understand and respect each family's cultural background, beliefs and practices. It is equally important to respect the values, identification (e.g., ethnic, sexual orientation, etc.) and beliefs of individual children and youth in care. The guide includes recommendations from and for birth parents and foster parents/kinship caregivers on ways they can build stronger relationships to meet the needs of the child or youth and also work collaboratively with the child welfare worker and other service providers.

It is organized with four distinct relationship-building topics followed by a conclusion, glossary and recommended readings and other resources. The *Recommendations for Using the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide* provides a brief description of how agency leaders can incorporate the tool to help achieve systemic changes in practice, culture and policies related to birth and foster parent relationships and better outcomes for children.

### ***Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation***

This document shares lessons learned from Quality Parenting Initiative jurisdictions and the national Birth and Foster Parent Partnership movement about culture, practice and policy transformation. These groups have been working on efforts to implement system changes that support co-parenting during the past decade. This document provides agency leaders and other stakeholders with strategies for creating the right conditions for culture changes that facilitate strong birth and foster parent partnerships. Practices and policies that support strong birth and foster parent partnerships are also described, as well as tips for practice and policy implementation. The practices, policies, and implementation tips included reflect the lessons jurisdictions are learning as they listen to parents and shift agency culture. They also reflect direct feedback and suggestions from birth parents and foster parents who have co-parented successfully and who have learned from their own experiences what practices and policies work to help them co-parent well. It also integrates information about how to instigate and sustain a change process that engages all key stakeholders and utilizes input to create real, lasting system improvements.

### **Promoting Partnerships and Policy Changes**

If you are a birth parent, we hope you will use the *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide* to help build a strong partnership with the foster parents or kinship caregivers who are helping to care for your child or adolescent. If you are a foster parent or kinship caregiver, we hope you will use this guide to strengthen your relationship with the birth parents of the children or youth in your care. If you are a child welfare worker, foster parent, parent partner, court advocate, parent or child attorney, foster parent association or representative or other service provider, we hope you will introduce the guide to birth parents and foster parents/kinship caregivers. We also encourage other agency staff and administrators to adopt protocols to support the wide dissemination and use of this guide and the *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation* to promote agency culture and policy changes needed to support these important relationships.

*“When youth enter foster care, the goal is usually reunification, and in my case, that is what happened. If reunification had not been possible, my connection to my mother still would have been just as important. If anyone had attempted to keep us apart it would have been devastating for me, and I know that the instant I turned 18 I would have been out looking for her. Even though I had great influences in my life throughout foster care, none of them would have been able to replace the relationship I had with my mother; that bond is critical.”*

**Kodi Baughman, former foster youth  
(Iowa)**

Kodi spent a year in kinship placement with his grandmother. He currently helps



families whose lives are touched by the child welfare system and serves on the National Foster Youth and Alumni Policy Council.

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## *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide*

We are parents who belong to the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, (BFPP), and we are excited to introduce this new *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide*. This tool provides helpful ways to spark conversations and talk with each other about the unique needs and interests of the children and youth you care about, how you as parents and caregivers can regularly keep in contact with each other and suggestions on how you can work together and support each other to achieve positive outcomes for all families involved. Of course, we hope that the staff in the systems where you are connected will engage and support this relationship-building opportunity.

We believe that the investment in collaborating with one another will help all the caring adults involved in a child's life work together to best support them and each other. It also may produce life-long meaningful relationships. Just as this guide can be used by you as a birth parent, foster parent or kinship caregiver, we are also hoping it might help others who are involved in the children's lives, such as other family members, siblings and all those who are connected with the child. We also expect that this resource will help staff members better engage with birth parents and foster parents/ kinship caregivers as you explore

together how to best navigate the system and these new relationships.

This guide is designed to help child welfare agencies and any community stakeholders who work closely with them to develop and support a culture that actively promotes connections for everyone involved when children or youth are in the foster care system and after they return to their parents or relatives or other living arrangements. Every situation is different but we hope that these ideas might provide you with a starting point. We recognize using this guide will require a commitment from you as a birth parent, foster parent, kinship caregiver or child welfare staff member. Because we know that each relationship is unique and that you have to find your own way, we want to be sure you know that this guide is a voluntary resource. It does not require any signatures or greater commitment than you are ready to make.

It is intended for use by:

- Birth families whose children or adolescents are in foster care or placed with a kinship caregiver; this includes both mothers and fathers.



The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) met in 2019 and worked with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative and Casey Family Programs to create *A Relationship Building Guide* and *A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation*.

- Foster families/ kinship caregivers caring for children or youth whose birth family or close relatives are available for and willing to have meetings and regular contact.
- Public and private agency staff who are working with birth families and foster families/kinship caregivers.
- Community stakeholders including foster parent associations who are working with foster parents and birth parents.

The guide is organized with four distinct relationship-building topics followed by a conclusion, glossary and recommended readings and other resources. Each of the four sections includes a description of why that area is important and recommendations from and for birth parents and foster parents/kinship caregivers on ways they can build a stronger relationship. Recommendations for working with child welfare workers and other service providers are also discussed. These four topics are:

1. **Building the relationship.** Building a positive relationship between the birth parent and the foster parent/kinship caregiver at the beginning of the involvement with the child welfare system can help allow the child or youth to maintain a sense of identity and family history and help them understand the new relationships in their life. It also helps the birth and foster parents feel more supported. Equally important is creating healthy dialogue between foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents on topics about the individual needs of the children in care and their families (e.g., cultural beliefs, religious beliefs and traditions, racial and ethnic perspectives, LGBTQ issues, medical/dental history and other daily practices such as haircare, grooming, hygiene, nutrition, etc.).
2. **Supporting the relationship.** Children and youth benefit by feeling safer and learning healthy communication skills when they see the foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents working together. Children and youth can realize that they do not have to choose one family over another and that adults can get through difficult situations by communicating and supporting each other. Maintaining regular contact through telephone calls, texts, visits and sharing time together are other important ways to strengthen and support relationships between the foster parent/kinship caregiver, the birth parent and the child or youth.

### 3. **Keeping the relationship strong while working with the system and planning for reunification.**

While the children or youth are in care, it will be important for the birth family and the foster parent/kinship caregiver to keep their relationship strong by working as a supportive and unified team and sharing consistent information about the child or youth with the various other professionals who may be involved in working with the family. This will also help create a collaborative effort to support the family in working toward reunification or alternative living arrangements.

During this time, the birth parent may be working on fulfilling all of the requirements of their case plan to seek reunification. The foster parent/kinship caregivers can look for ways to be supportive and the birth parent can keep the foster parent/kinship caregiver updated on their progress, concerns and any other important information.

### 4. **Keeping the relationship strong after the birth family leaves the system.**

In many situations, it is the positive and supportive relationship the birth parent experienced with the foster parent/kinship caregiver that helped the parent gain the necessary skills and tools to successfully provide a nurturing and stable home for their children or youth. We often see parents and caregivers remain in contact with each other and provide support to each other. Some foster parents become known as “aunts’ and “uncles” to the children or youth. During post reunification, and also with alternative living arrangements, a birth parent may wish to continue to have communication and contact with foster parents/kinship caregivers to keep everyone involved as a support system for their children (e.g., similar to an extended family system). Also, the birth parent may call upon the foster parent/kinship caregivers to help them with child care or respite care.

This guide is written from a **strengths-based perspective**. This means we are focusing on the strengths of the birth parents and the foster parents/kinship caregivers and how we can build on them. Also, we know all families have a culture and traditions that they follow. It is important to know, understand and respect each family’s cultural background, beliefs and practices.

# Partnerships and Protective Factors

Strong parent partnerships elevate the five protective factors that are part of the Strengthening Families approach to support family wellbeing and prevent child abuse and neglect. When birth parents and foster parents/kinship caregivers are working together effectively, families have more resources to be strong and resilient, to provide children with the love and connection they need for healthy

development and to build networks of people who help them when times are tough. Seeing their parents and foster parents model using the protective factors in their own lives can help children and youth learn to build on their own strengths and draw on their own resilience in challenging times as they move into adulthood.

## Parental Resilience

The ability to recover from difficult life experiences, and often to be strengthened by and even transformed by those experiences.

Foster parents and birth parents can offer each other encouragement and support and also help each other see their own strengths related to resilience. For example, each can point out times they have seen the other show resilience in difficult situations.

## Social Connections

The ability and opportunity to develop positive relationships that lessen stress and isolation and help to build a supportive network.

Foster parents and birth parents can help each other think about any existing positive social connections they have and how they can build additional connections. A strong relationship between the birth parent and the foster parent can become an important social connection for both of them. They can strengthen their social connection through sharing medical and service provider appointments, inviting each other to celebrations, family events, attending trainings together, as well as attending co-parent support groups, Parent Cafés, or sharing a cup of coffee or a walk in the park as friends.

## Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

The ability to exercise effective parenting strategies to guide and know what to expect as children develop in multiple domains (physical, cognitive, language and social and emotional).

Both foster parents and birth parents can gain knowledge from formal classes, informal conversations with family members and friends and written or web-based materials. Foster parents and birth parents can share their parenting knowledge and experiences with each other.

## Concrete Support in Times of Need

Access to supports and services that reduces stress and helps to make families stronger.

There are times when all families may need support to reduce stresses. Foster parents and birth parents can share and learn from each other about various resources for basic needs, education and supplies that they know about in the community. They can each share any times that they needed help meeting their own basic needs. It is important that any parent understand that there is no need for shame or blame in reaching out for help. In fact, it is a sign of commitment to their children when parents reach out for help when needed.

## Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

Birth parent and foster parents both have important roles in helping to foster the healthy social and emotional development of the children in their care. When both can practice supportive co-parenting, children can gain feelings of safety and trust and they can better grow and thrive. Birth parents and foster parents can share ideas for discipline and regulation that will provide consistency for the children in their care.

For more information check out the Children's Trust Fund Alliance's free of charge, online training on the protective factors framework at [ctfalliance.org/protective-factors](http://ctfalliance.org/protective-factors)





*“About a year into sobriety, I realized that I knew very little about how to live sober and grow without regrets. Luckily for me, I began learning about the importance of recognizing the existing protective factors in my life. I began to talk more with community-based providers, uncover causes for issues and learn more about how addiction is a disease. Ultimately, I began to believe in myself and learn new skills. As I continue to grow, I better understand how important the protective factors are in supporting me in my recovery and maintaining sobriety. Working to strengthen my protective factors is part of my daily routine as a parent.”*

**Corey Best, birth parent (Florida)**

A dedicated father and advocate, Corey is now a nationally recognized speaker on child welfare transformation and anti-racism.

## Using the Guide

We believe you will find this tool to be a valuable resource for strengthening relationships with others who are important adults in a child or youth’s life while he or she is in foster care.

Whether you are a birth parent, a foster parent or a kinship caregiver, we know you want the best for the children or youth you share in common. We anticipate that social workers, other staff members and community stakeholders will share this tool with birth and foster parents to explore their interests and willingness to use this tool as a resource for building a stronger relationship with each other. This tool may be introduced during foster parent trainings, at foster parent association meetings, during parent orientations or in an individual visit with staff. It is important that the person who introduces this tool believes in and supports the idea of building strong, trusting and authentic relationships between birth parents, foster parents/kinship caregivers and staff.

Sometimes, a foster parent may have used this tool with parents of other children in their home so they may be familiar with it and will share it with the birth parent. Other times, the birth parent may learn about this tool from other birth parents, a parent partner or

a kinship navigator. The birth parent may share it with the foster parent and invite conversation. A social worker or staff member may share it with the birth parent and foster parent. If you use this tool, it is important that you discuss it together, find agreement on the recommendations and use it as a basis to guide your interactions.

The timing of when the guide is introduced to the birth and foster parents and/or kinship caregivers may vary depending on the situation. It will be important to introduce the tool as early as possible being mindful of a family’s emotional trauma and uncertainty about a child or youth being removed and where he or she is placed. There is no required point in which this guide must be used. It is designed to be flexible and to support the building of relationships when individuals are ready to do so. The relationship building guide is beneficial to use throughout the entire process: before placement, at the start of a placement, throughout the duration of a placement, during a placement change and after reunification. It may be useful to formally revisit the tool together periodically to evaluate how things are going in the relationship and to consider any needed changes or updates in their agreements.

*“Birth parents may be more likely to make improvements in their life situations when they have a positive relationship and sense of support from the foster family. This relationship can be extremely helpful for children and their parents dealing with a separation.”*

**Sandra Killett, birth parent (New York City)**

As a well-respected social justice organizer and parent advocate, Sandra has mobilized parents to use their voices to transform the child welfare system and its policies.



# 1. Building the Relationship

Building a positive relationship between the birth parent and the foster parent/kinship caregiver at the beginning of the placement can help create a smooth transition so that the children or youth are able to experience the love, support and care of two families. When both families are willing to work together to coordinate the care of the children or youth, it allows them to maintain a sense of identity and family history and helps them understand the new relationships in their life. It also helps the birth parent and the foster parent feel more supported. Positive relationships lead to:

- Supporting regular open communication about ways the parents can meet the specific needs of the child or adolescent.
- Helping both families get questions answered.
- Keeping routines and traditions for the child or adolescent as consistent as possible.

Two particular strategies, comfort calls and in-person family introductory meetings, can help to begin the relationship building process by talking about important background information relating to the children or youth and also learning more about one another. Comfort calls usually happen within 24 hours of the children or youth being placed in a home. Social workers can request permission from birth parents to share their telephone number. This is usually the first time that the birth and foster parents will begin talking with one another. An in-person family introductory meeting (also referred to as an icebreaker meeting) is best held within three to five days after placement and is another way to help build this connection.

Other creative ideas for initial relationship building situations include: a meeting at the hospital or medical center, team meetings and group orientations or trainings. Because Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) frequently have contact with birth parents and foster parents during visits with children, they are in a unique position to talk with them about the positive impact of partnering together to help meet the needs of the children or youth

in care. All of these strategies support the relationship building process by providing an opportunity for:

- The birth parent to develop a sense of being respected for what he/she knows about his/her child and the foster parents being accepted as a support for the children or youth.
- The foster parent/kinship caregiver to let the birth parent know of his/her interest in working in partnership with the parent to minimize the trauma of foster care and support reunification.
- Both sets of parents to talk about the unique needs and interests of the children or youth in care (e.g., sleeping habits, food preferences, likes and dislikes, etc.).

Equally important is recognizing and creating healthy dialogue between foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents on topics to recognize the individuality of the children or youth in care and their families.

It is important to consider:

- Different parenting styles and discipline practices
- Cultural beliefs and traditions
- Ethnic practices
- Sexual identification and the need to be sure that all people are free from any form of discrimination
- Religious beliefs and the importance of supporting any existing religious beliefs and practices of the child.
- Medical/dental history
- Other daily practices (e.g., haircare, grooming, hygiene and nutrition)

It could be uncomfortable for the foster parent/kinship caregiver or the birth parent to discuss some of these issues. If you do not know how to approach a certain subject, it is best to ask for more information in a respectful and caring manner.

*“As a foster parent, I have deep appreciation for the challenges faced by birth parents when their children are placed in the foster care system and in my home. My goal is to do all I can to help them achieve their goals of getting their children back home. After they are reunified, I try to stay in touch if that is welcomed by the birth parent and remain a support to the whole family.”*

**Robyn Robbins, foster parent (California)**



# 1. Building the Relationship

Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways to build a strong relationship with the foster parent/kinship caregiver through comfort calls and other introductory meetings to share your knowledge about your child, maintain a close bond and keep in regular contact with your child.</p>	<p>Suggested ways to build a strong relationship and support the birth parent in comfort calls and other introductory meetings to help you understand the experiences, culture, traditions and routines of the child so that you can better respond to the needs of the family.</p>
<p>Here are some ideas you may want to share or discuss during a comfort call or an in-person family introductory meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I really love and care about my child.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I am hoping that my child will be able to come back home to me.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I want to know how my child is doing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know about my child’s medical information.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know what my child really likes.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know what my child doesn’t like.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know that my child needs this routine for bedtime.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I would like to know what school my child will attend.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I would like to know how many children you have cared for in your home.</li> </ul> <p>You may wish to ask questions about where your child is placed and information about the foster parents/kinships caregivers such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What does your home look like?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Are there any other children in your home?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What does an average day in your house look like?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> How will my child fit into your family?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> How do you handle discipline in your family?</li> </ul> <p>It would be valuable for you to share your child’s sleeping habits, food preferences, likes and dislikes, medical issues, school progress and other relevant information to help the foster parent/kinship caregiver provide a smooth adjustment for your child.</p>	<p>Here are some ways that you can introduce yourself during the comfort call or in-person family introductory meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> “Hi – I am Betty, the foster parent taking care of your son for now. I can tell that he really misses you and his dad. I wanted to make sure that you knew who was taking care of Tommy and I would love for you to help me to do this.”</li> </ul> <p>The foster parent/kinship caregiver may ask the birth parent questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Do you have any ideas how I can help your child tonight?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What is your child’s favorite toy? Likes? Dislikes?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What is your child’s favorite song that he/she likes?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does your child have a bedtime routine or any sleep habits?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> How are you doing?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Do you have anyone who can support you right now?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Can I tell your son or daughter that you are doing okay to help him or her feel more comfortable?</li> </ul> <p>If you are comfortable doing so, you might share information about your family size and the ages and gender of the other children in your home. You may also want to describe a little about what your home looks like and the general neighborhood where you live.</p> <p>If the birth parent does not want to talk during the first comfort call, you may say you understand why they may be upset and ask if it would be okay to call back. Explain that you would like to share how their son or daughter is doing and also obtain ideas from the parent about how best to support their child at this challenging time.</p>
<p>Some suggested ways to talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about topics to recognize the individuality of your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to share information about how your child looks forward to certain religious holiday celebrations. For example, your child may wish to light Chanukah candles during this Jewish holiday. You may wish to ask to take your child to the synagogue to celebrate this time together.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to share how you help your daughter braid her hair. You might ask to arrange a weekly time to help her do this.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You might want to share your child’s likes or dislikes about different activities (e.g., playing in snow, riding a bicycle, etc.).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to talk about cultural opportunities for your teen such as participation in Tribal gatherings, LGTBQ and other support groups that meet regularly.</li> </ul>	<p>Some suggested ways to talk with the birth family about topics to recognize the individuality of their child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may be unsure about how to assist a child/youth with their grooming, haircare or hygiene due to their cultural upbringing. You might ask the birth parent:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> “Do you have any advice on how to best help your child with their grooming and haircare – does she/he have any special clothing preferences?”</li> <li><input type="radio"/> “Does your child have a favorite way of bathing – does he or she prefer a shower or bath?”</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may learn that the child or youth wishes to attend weekly religious services. You may wish to talk with the birth parents to make arrangements for this.</li> </ul>

## 2. Supporting the Relationship

Children and youth benefit and learn healthy communications skills when they see the foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents talking regularly in a positive manner. Seeing them all working together can help the children and youth realize that they do not have to choose one family over another. It also shows the child or adolescent that adults can get through difficult situations by communicating and supporting each other.

Open and ongoing communication between the foster parent/kinship caregiver, the birth parent and the child can help build trusting and lasting relationships. Birth parents may be more likely to stay connected and share information when the foster parent/kinship caregiver is willing to support and encourage the birth parent and child or youth to ask for help whenever needed. Regular communications between them can help them stay up-to-date on all matters relating to the child and family. It also can help clarify different or confusing feelings that the birth parent, child or youth may be experiencing during this period of time.

Maintaining regular contact through visits and sharing time together are other important ways to strengthen and support relationships between the foster parent/kinship caregiver, the birth parent, child or youth.

The foster parent/kinship caregiver can play a critical role in supporting positive, regular visitation between the birth parents, the child or youth and their siblings. Visits enable the child or youth to see that his or her family is okay. This family time together also gives everyone the opportunity to stay connected and work towards reunification together whenever possible. Talks between the foster parent/kinship caregiver and the birth parent can focus on ideas to make the visitation special and memorable for the child or youth. They can also talk about what works best so they can maximize quality time during the visits.

Other opportunities for foster parents/kinship caregivers to help promote family time together include:

- Encouraging birth parents to participate with them in their child's medical appointments, dental appointments, school conferences/events and court hearings.
- Encouraging birth parents to participate with them in family outings, trips to the park, birthday parties, holiday events and other special celebrations.
- Offering to drive the birth family to appointments and events.

*“It’s most effective when the foster parent and birth parent work together to coordinate their efforts in caring for a child, particularly relating to culture and traditions. This helps the children and youth maintain their own sense of identity, family history and also increases connections that help them understand the new relationships in their life. This partnership hastens stable reunification because the child has more supportive people in their constellations and research has shown that this is really important to the child’s future. These connections are critical to older youth who are close to aging out. In the end, this birth and foster parent partnership strengthens both families.”*

**Jessica Lloyd-Rogers, foster parent (Oregon)**

As a former foster parent and the current President of the Oregon Foster Parent Association, Jessica believes in keeping children and youth safe and surrounded by caring adults who help them grow to become confident, caring, competent and contributing adult members of their community.



*“There were barriers to staying connected to my mom while my siblings and I were in care. Because all our visits had to be supervised by a child welfare worker, it was difficult to work around everyone’s schedules. If there had been more time for us to be together as a family before reunification, it would have made things easier.”*

**Kodi Baughman, former foster youth (Iowa)**

## 2. Supporting the Relationship

Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways to strengthen and build a stronger relationship with the foster parent/kinship caregiver by making regular efforts to stay connected and up-to-date about your child’s progress.</p>	<p>Suggested ways to strengthen and build a stronger relationship with the birth parent by discussing how both parties will regularly communicate and share information. In this way, you show respect for the birth parent by requesting his/her input in decision-making around their child.</p>
<p>Below are some suggested ways to regularly communicate with the foster parent/kinship caregiver and your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Let your children know that it is okay to be with their foster family while you work on getting stronger and healthier.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask the foster parent about setting up a regular time to talk about your son or daughter’s progress.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parents about texting or sending photos or short videos to you about your son or daughter.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask about obtaining art projects, grades and report cards from the foster parents/kinship caregivers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask about setting up phone calls and facetime chats with your son or daughter multiple times during the week.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to share parts of your story with those caring for your children and hearing theirs in return, which can help create trusted connections.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to ask the foster parent to help you maintain strong connections between your child and any other siblings in the family and any other important relatives in the child’s life.</li> </ul>	<p>Below are some recommended communication strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may suggest to the birth parent, “Let’s talk about what we will agree upon to share in information and how will we communicate back and forth about your son or daughter.”</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You might also say: “You are the expert in knowing what your child needs. We really value your thoughts and recommendations relating to your child. We hope that you can help us with identifying how best to meet your child’s needs.”</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sharing parts of your story with the birth family and hearing theirs in return can help to create trusted connections.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk to the birth parents about the specific hygiene items they use with their child so that you can decide if you want to use the same products in your home.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage the child or youth to make cards or art projects as gifts for his or her family.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Support the child or adolescent in having contact with his or her siblings and other family members by telephone calls, emails, letters and cards.</li> </ul>
<p>Some suggested ways to get involved in visits and special family time with your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about participating in your child’s medical appointments, dental appointments and school conferences/events. In some states, participation in these activities is a legal right of the birth parent.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> When invited by the foster parent/kinship caregiver, participate together with them in faith-based activities, family outings, birthday parties, holiday events and other special celebrations.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If your child is an infant or toddler, during visits, the foster parent/kinship caregiver may provide you with updates through written notes in your child’s diaper bag or a journal. If this happens, you may wish to respond back to the foster parent/kinship caregiver with your own thoughts about your child.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If needed, you could ask the foster parent/kinship caregiver to help with transportation to a visit or ask for a transportation voucher from your social worker.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about jointly approaching the social worker to request more visits in more natural settings (e.g., the foster parent/kinship caregiver’s home, playground, family resource center or other community space).</li> </ul>	<p>Some suggested ways to work with the birth parents to make the best of visits and special family time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Invite the birth parents, siblings or other family members to school functions, sporting events and community activities or a fun outing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If the child is an infant or toddler, provide the birth parent with regular updates about their child by sending special notes or a journal in a diaper bag or a small bag that the child carries with them during visits.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Offer to transport a parent and their child to a visit together.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Send the child or youth with all items that they might need during a visit with their parents (e.g., games, snacks and activities they can do with their parents).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Collaborate with the foster families of the siblings of the child or youth to plan joint activities regularly to help maintain sibling relationships during their separation.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Work with the birth parent to meet jointly with the social worker to discuss visitation plans such as increasing the frequency and length of visits and making arrangements for family visits to occur in the most natural setting possible.</li> </ul>

### 3. Keeping the Relationship Strong while Working with the System and Planning for Reunification

While the children are in care, it will be important for the birth family and the foster parent/kinship caregiver to keep their relationship strong by working as a supportive and unified team. It is especially helpful when the foster parent/kinship caregiver and the birth parent decide together how they will share consistent information about the child with the various other professionals who may be involved in working with the family. Other professionals

may include social workers, medical and dental providers, schools, family members, special service providers and others. This will also help create a collaborative effort in helping the family work toward reunification or alternative living arrangements.

During this time, the birth parent may be working to fulfill all of the requirements of his/her case plan to seek reunification. The foster parent/kinship caregivers can look for ways to be supportive and the birth parent can keep the foster parent/kinship caregiver updated on their progress, concerns and any other important information. Birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers can work together to begin preparing the child for a positive reunification if that is part of the plan.



*“A strong relationship between a birth parent and foster parent can make a huge difference for a child and their birth family. I think it is awesome to know that your child is safe. I especially appreciate that the foster parent wants to know what practices I use to care for my child. I also have some comfort knowing that the foster parent cares about me. In this way, I can move forward with my own healing and also work on a plan for a better life for me and my family.”*

**Shana Hunts Along, birth parent (Minnesota)**



Shana is a citizen of Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. She overcame major substance use challenges and successfully turned her life around and reunified with her two children. Today, Shana works as a parent mentor and community outreach advocate with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Law Center in Minneapolis and she provides support to American Indian families affected by the child protection system. It was this center that successfully represented her when her child welfare case was open. Shana helped to create the Parent Mentor Program within the ICWA Law Center.

### 3. Keeping the Relationship Strong while Working with the System and Planning for Reunification

Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways for keeping your relationship strong with the foster parent/kinship caregiver while working with the system and planning for reunification.</p>	<p>Suggested ways for keeping your relationship strong with the birth parents while working with the system and planning for reunification.</p>
<p>Ways for you to work in a team approach with the foster parent/kinship caregiver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about how the two of you can jointly approach the social worker to request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Access to resources from the department and other service providers to help you move toward reunification</li> <li><input type="radio"/> More frequent visits with the children</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Visits occurring in the most natural setting</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about holding regular family meetings to discuss ways to move forward with reunification or alternative living arrangements.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about working together on a journal to help you see your child’s progress and help you see your own growth in your parenting skills and also in your personal life.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent about preparing for the Citizen Review Board hearings. This hearing may result in recommendations to the judge and findings that support additional services to help achieve reunification.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask the foster parent to work with you to help your child feel prepared when it is time to leave the foster home to return to your home or to another placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent about how you would like to maintain contact with them after reunification or a change in your child’s placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent about any broader policy changes you hope the two of you might recommend to the child welfare agency, the courts or other systems involved in your family’s life.</li> </ul>	<p>Ways for you to work in a team approach with the birth parent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assist the birth parent in understanding the roles and responsibilities of the various service providers and systems who are involved with the child.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Advocate together with the birth parent to access all the services and resources needed to help the family reunify.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Work with the birth parent to meet jointly with the social worker to discuss visitation plans such as increased frequency and length of visits and for family visits to occur in the most natural setting possible.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Support the birth family in meeting together regularly as a family unit to discuss plans for working toward reunification or alternative living arrangements.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Work with the birth parent to create a journal that can help them see their child’s progress and also their own personal growth and progress in developing their parenting skills.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the birth parent about ways to help the child prepare for leaving the foster home and returning back home to the family or to another placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities to celebrate successes of both the child or youth and the birth family.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask how you can continue to support the birth parent and the foster parent connections for the child after reunification or change in placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Be open to talking with the birth parent about common interests in making some policy change recommendations to the child welfare agency or to the courts.</li> </ul>

*“My mom had worked on preparing to be the best mom she could be to get us back. I didn’t have the opportunity to work on anything that would help me grow and change. When we went home I was not prepared to be her child again. I was not ready for my mom to take on a parenting role. She had changed the way she was doing things to alleviate concerns from the system. I had always been just fine taking care of myself. This created a lot of growing pains and struggles in what should have been a happy and smooth transition back into the care of our mom.”*

**Kodi Baughman, former foster youth (Iowa)**



## 4. Keeping the Relationship Strong after the Family Leaves the Child Welfare System

After the child(ren) or youth and parents are reunited, it usually takes some time for the family to readjust to living together. In many situations, it is the positive and supportive relationship that the birth parent experienced with the foster parent/kinship caregiver that helped the parent gain the necessary skills and tools to successfully provide a nurturing and stable home for their children. We often see parents and caregivers continue to keep in contact with each other and provide support to each other. Many foster families/kinship caregivers stay closely connected with the birth family and

build long-term relationships for the children and family. Some foster parents become known as “aunts’ and “uncles” to the children. During post reunification, a birth parent may wish to continue having contact and communication with foster parents/kinship caregivers to keep them involved as a support. The birth parent may ask the foster parent/kinship caregivers to attend family celebrations or to help with babysitting or respite care as is done in an extended family system.

Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways for continuing your relationship with the foster parent/kinship caregiver during post reunification and beyond.</p>	<p>Suggested ways for continuing your relationship with the birth parent and children during post reunification and beyond.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Share that you wish to continue to have contact and communication with the foster parents/kinship caregivers as way to keep them involved as a support for you and the child or youth.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about helping out with child care or respite care.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Invite the foster family/kinship caregiver to join family outings, birthday parties, school events, holiday events and other special celebrations.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Continue to share pictures of your family and children with the foster family/kinship caregivers and let them know how much you appreciate their help.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk to your children about their foster family/kinship caregivers so they know that they are still loved by them too.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask the foster parent/kinship caregiver if he/she will partner with you to share how your positive relationship with each other helped your family be strong and reunite to help make the child welfare system be as strong as possible for other parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Continue to include the birth family in special family events, celebrations and holidays.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide assistance with child care or respite care.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Let the birth parents know that you are available to them and will support them as they gradually learn to readjust to their role as the main caregivers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Remind birth parents that they do not need to be perfect and that everyone may need time to adjust and learn their new roles. This is especially important during the beginning stages of post reunification.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Let the birth parents know that you would be happy to participate in family outings, birthday parties and other events whenever you are invited by the birth family.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the birth parent about both of you sharing your positive collaborative experiences with other child welfare workers, foster parents and other birth families still involved with the system.</li> </ul>

*“At the end of the placement, as long as it is safe, a child should have everyone who they love in their life.”*

**Jody Rodgers, birth parent (California)**

Jody is raising her three children and working at a dream job as a parent mentor. She has struggled with substance use and domestic violence challenges and her children were placed in out-of-home care. She is grateful for the journey because without it she would not be the strong woman, friend, mentor and mother that she is today. Today, she is a nationally recognized parent advocate.





*“Relationships are strengthened through mutual open mindedness and willingness to meet others where they are. It is important to understand that everyone is different and to look for the best in others.”*

**Lydia Goodson, birth parent (Georgia)**



Lydia is the Outreach Coordinator for Mosaic Place Addiction Recovery Support Center. She works daily to break down the stigma that is associated with substance use disorder.

## Conclusion

Relationships are critical to ensure that families have a lasting sense of belonging, support and guidance when needed. Children are most likely to benefit and thrive when the important adults in their lives cooperate with each other and share responsibilities and decision-making. Our hope is this guide will help:

- The adults in each child or youth’s life ensure that their needs will be met and help them manage this challenging situation.
- Sustain strong family ties so that children and youth of all ages maintain contact with their families, culture, heritage, traditions, religion and other important aspects of their lives.
- Build understanding for each individual regarding their strengths and their ability to overcome challenges together.
- Birth parents share important information about their child or adolescent and family with the foster parents and/or kinship caregivers.
- Foster parents keep birth parents informed and up to date on their child or youth’s continuing progress.
- All parties make a commitment to a respectful and supportive relationship.
- Agency staff begin to view birth parents in a more positive way and begin to develop trusting relationships with them.
- When possible, for all parties to remain in contact long term after reunification so that the foster parents or kinship caregivers remain active in a child’s life and supportive of the family’s success.

Our goal is to ensure that all the children know they are cared for and loved and that you as a parent, foster parent, kinship caregiver or social worker know you are an important part of making that happen. Fortunately, the child welfare system is evolving and creating fertile soil for these new ways of working together.

## Glossary of Terms

All definitions, except for comfort calls, icebreakers and parent partner programs are collected from the Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [childwelfare.gov/glossary/glossary](http://childwelfare.gov/glossary/glossary)

**comfort calls** – Agencies may arrange a call between the foster parents and birth parents within 24 hours after the child has been removed. It is important to have buy-in from the agency, caseworker, birth parent, and foster parent to conduct this type of call. Caseworkers can request permission from birth parents to share their contact information. The foster parent introduces himself/herself and shares with the birth parent how their child is doing. The foster parent also lets the birth parent know of their interest in working in partnership

with the parent to minimize the trauma of foster care and support reunification if possible. During the call, the foster parent may try to gather some information from the birth parent regarding sleeping habits, food preferences, likes and dislikes, etc.

**family reunification** – Refers to the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their families of origin. Reunification is both the primary goal for children in out-of-home care as well as the most common outcome.

**fictive kin** – People not related by birth or marriage who have an emotionally significant relationship with an individual.

**foster care** – A 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians, and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and preadoptive homes. (Adapted from the Code of Federal Regulations)

**foster parent** – Adults who provide a temporary home and everyday nurturing and support for children who have been removed from their homes. The individual(s) may be relatives or nonrelatives and are required to be licensed in order to provide care for foster children. In some states or jurisdictions, foster parents are referred to as 'resource parents.'

**icebreakers** – These are child-focused, face-to-face meetings held between birth parents and foster parents as soon as possible after a child is placed in out-of-home care. Ideally such meetings are held no later than three to five days after placement. Icebreakers are recommended whenever a child experiences a placement change – from home to a foster home, from the foster home back to his or her parents, etc. The purpose of the icebreaker meeting is twofold: to share important information about a child and to begin building a relationship between the child's birth parents and the new caregivers. Both of these purposes are critical in reducing the trauma the child has experienced as a result of placement. Icebreakers open the door for communication and enable the birth and foster parents to exchange information about the child. (Biehle, Karri, and Goodman, Denise, *Icebreaker meetings: A Tool for Building Relationships Between Birth and Foster Parents*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012)



**kinship adoption** – Adoption of a child by someone related by family ties or a prior relationship.

**kinship foster care** – An arrangement that can occur when a public child welfare agency has legal custody and places a child with relatives or kin in a foster care arrangement. This type of arrangement is often referred to as either “formal” or “public” kinship care. Kinship foster homes may be either licensed or unlicensed, depending on State licensing requirements and family preferences.

**kinship navigator program** – A federally funded program that connects children involved with child welfare to grandparents or relative caregivers and helps those caregivers identify and access needed services. Kinship navigator programs are funded through grants established by the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018.

**non-relative extended family members** – When a child is detained by the county social services agency, the agency has certain legal obligations to identify and notify relatives (including siblings) of the child’s removal. The county agency also has a legal obligation to assess those relatives and/or non-relative extended family members (NREFMs) for placement.

**parent partner programs** – Parent partner programs provide a peer-to-peer approach for supporting parents and their families in achieving positive outcomes. Parent partner programs include caring and empathetic parent partners, with previous lived experiences with the child welfare system, who provide guidance, mentoring, advocacy and support to new parents facing the challenges and emotional impact of the child welfare system. Parent partners also may be referred to as parent advocates, family advocates, parent mentors, veteran parents, parent allies and system navigators. Parent partner programs vary in their approach and the way they are structured. For more information about Casey Family Programs’ work on how parent partner programs support reunification as well as a snapshot of research on these programs, please see *How do parent partner programs instill hope and support prevention and reunification?*, Issue Brief: Healthy Organizations, Casey Family Programs, updated May 2019, [casey.org/parent-partner-program](https://casey.org/parent-partner-program) and *How do parent partner programs instill hope and support prevention and reunification?* Appendix A: Snapshot of research on parent partner programs, Casey Family Programs Healthy Organizations Issue Brief, updated May, 2019, [casey.org/appendix-a-research-parent-partner-programs](https://casey.org/appendix-a-research-parent-partner-programs)

**resource family** – Includes foster/adoptive parents, foster parents, and relative or kinship caregivers. (Adapted from the *Annie E. Casey Foundation*.)

**respite care services**– Short-term child care services intended for parents and other caregivers that offer temporary relief, improve family stability, and reduce the risk of abuse or neglect. Respite can be planned or offered during emergencies or times of crisis.

*“My advice is that foster parents reach out to biological parents in a genuine way. Being genuine can help alleviate the fear the biological parents may have about the foster parents trying to take their children away from them. I believe foster parents can help biological parents after it is clear that they are there to support them and not judge them. This kind of healthy connection between the children, the foster parents, and the biological parents can make such a positive impact that the foster parents may stay engaged with the family long after the case closes. The big takeaway is to align with the biological parents so that everyone is moving forward together as a team.”*

**Kodi Baughman, former foster youth (Iowa)**



# Recommended Readings and Other Resources

## Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP)

The following materials provide information about the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP). Download them at [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp):

- BFPP Position Statement
- BFPP Partnering Organizations
- BFPP Policy and Practice Priorities Brief
- Matrix of Birth and Foster Parent Strategies

## Partnership Approach to Transform Systems

The following resources recommend using a partnership approach to transform the child welfare system. All are available for download at [tinyurl.com/bfpp-resources](http://tinyurl.com/bfpp-resources):

- *21st Century Child Welfare System Draft Framework* developed by Casey Family Programs
- *Building a 21st Century Child Welfare System*, March 2019 Convening in Brief hosted by Casey Family Programs
- *How Can Birth and Foster Parent Partnerships Help Families Reunify?* developed by Casey Family Programs
- *Partnering with Birth Parents to Promote Reunification* factsheet developed by the Children's Bureau
- Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) Summary

## Parent Voice Publications

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance partners with parents to share their voice and help them impact policy. The following publications were developed by the Alliance's National Parent Partnership Council (ANPPC) and the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) and can be downloaded at the links below:

- ANPPC: *Partnering with Parents* acrostic tool. [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/anppc/#resources](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/anppc/#resources)
- BPNN: *What Parents Say About...Building a 21st Century Community-Based Approach to Strengthening Families*. [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp)
- BPNN: *What Parents Say About...Prevention Strategies that Work to Keep Families Together, Resilient and Strong*. [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp)
- BPNN: *What Parents Say About...What Works in Substance Abuse Recovery to Strengthen Protective Factors in Families and Ensure Children's Safety and Well-Being*. [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp](http://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp)

## Other Resources

Additional materials are available at the links below:

- Children's Trust Fund Alliance Protective Factors Online Training and Training of Trainers. [ctfalliance.org/protective-factors/#OnlineTraining](http://ctfalliance.org/protective-factors/#OnlineTraining)
- Casey Family Programs' 2019 Signature Report: On the Pathway to Hope. [casey.org/hope](http://casey.org/hope) (read on the web page or scroll to the bottom of the webpage to download)
- Casey Family Programs Executive Summary – *Strategies to Increase Birth Parent Engagement, Partnership and Leadership in the Child Welfare System: A Review*. [casey.org/strategies-and-programs-to-improve-birth-parent-engagement](http://casey.org/strategies-and-programs-to-improve-birth-parent-engagement)
- The Quality Parenting Initiative: Transforming Foster Care to Prioritize Childhoods. [fosteringchamps.org/the-quality-parenting-initiative-transforming-foster-care-to-prioritize-childhoods](http://fosteringchamps.org/the-quality-parenting-initiative-transforming-foster-care-to-prioritize-childhoods)
- Quality Parenting Initiative: Link to article about QPI in Louisiana. [theadvocate.com/baton\\_rouge/news/article\\_a9d467f8-67d0-11e7-83d8-c3f7375f5577.html](http://theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_a9d467f8-67d0-11e7-83d8-c3f7375f5577.html)
- Quality Parenting Initiative: Building a New Relationship Based System National Panel Video. [centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/2019nationalconf/genwelcomestory/p2.html](http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/2019nationalconf/genwelcomestory/p2.html)
- Quality Parenting Initiative: Relationship Based Visitation. [qpi4kids.org/documents/2019\\_qpiNationalConference/Workshop%20Relationship%20Based%20Visitation/FosteringRelationships.pdf](http://qpi4kids.org/documents/2019_qpiNationalConference/Workshop%20Relationship%20Based%20Visitation/FosteringRelationships.pdf)
- Building Bridges Between Birth Parents and Foster Parents, (*Chronicle of Social Change*, January 3, 2018, written by Kim Phagan-Hansel). [chronicleofsocialchange.org/featured/building-bridges-birth-parents-fostering-parents/29125](http://chronicleofsocialchange.org/featured/building-bridges-birth-parents-fostering-parents/29125)
- CHAMPS (Children Need Amazing Parents). [fosteringchamps.org](http://fosteringchamps.org)
- CHAMPS Policy Playbook Birth and Foster Family Relationships. [playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/support-relationships-between-birth-and-foster-families](http://playbook.fosteringchamps.org/policy-goal/support-relationships-between-birth-and-foster-families)
- Family Voices United. [familyvoicesunited.org](http://familyvoicesunited.org)

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# TIPS

## for Birth Parents, Foster Parents and Kinship Caregivers

### Birth Parent

- Understand that the foster parent/kinship caregiver is not trying to take your child away from you but is trying to be a support while you are separated.
- Offer information about your child's sleeping habits, food preferences and other likes and dislikes to help the foster parent/kinship caregiver provide a smooth adjustment for your child.
- Stay in regular contact with the foster parent/kinship caregiver and your child and participate in ongoing visitations, attend school functions, events, activities and appointments.
- Ask the foster parent about setting up a regular time to talk about your son or daughter's progress.
- Talk with the foster parents about texting or sending photos or short videos to you about your son or daughter.
- Seek assistance or advice from the foster parent/kinship caregiver to help you get linked to the right services and resources.
- Share challenges that you may be facing to successfully complete your case plan.
- Let the foster parent/kinship caregiver know if you need to make a change in an appointment or commitment.
- Share any strong beliefs or preferences you have related to your child, such as hair length, getting a driver's license, etc.
- Let them know what your goals are and celebrate successes together.
- Ask the foster parent to work with you to help your child feel prepared when it is time to leave the foster home to return to your home or to another placement.
- Talk with the foster parent about how you would like to maintain contact with them after reunification or a change in your child's placement.

### Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver

- Let the birth parents know that your goal is to help them get their children back home with them.
- Include birth parents in decisions that affect their son or daughter, whenever possible.
- Seek information about the child's routines and likes and dislikes from the birth parent to help the child adjust when he/she is first placed in your home.
- Respect the personal information you may know about a family's situation.
- When talking with the child(ren) or youth, keep your comments regarding the birth parents positive.
- Offer your support or a word of encouragement to the birth parents and avoid criticism.
- Share information in a positive way about the child or youth's progress and the activities in which he or she is involved.
- Stay in regular contact with the birth parents by sending texts, short videos or photos.
- Provide opportunities for the child or youth to connect with their parents beyond telephone calls such as invitations to attend school functions, events, activities, or appointments.
- Call the birth parent when the child or youth is sick and not feeling well.
- Be sure to talk to the parent before taking any major steps with the child or adolescent, such as helping him/her get a driver's license.
- Ask birth parents what extra-curricular activities they think their children might enjoy.



*“Through my long-term experiences as a foster parent, I have worked with many birth parents. I have always been committed to building solid and supportive relationships with birth parents to help them reunify as quickly as possible with their children. I believe that birth parents and foster parents need to always work together to achieve successful reunification and prevent a child from re-entering the system. Strong and caring relationships are key to making this happen.”*

**Amanda Cruce, foster parent (Florida)**

A foster parent for eight years, Amanda is president of the Florida Foster Parent/Adoptive Association.

## BFPP's Core Practices for Positive System Change

Members of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) identified core practices and policies that, when implemented, can transform our current child welfare system to better serve children and their families. Some examples of these are listed below. For more information, download the policy practice brief at [ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp](https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp).

- Joint participation of birth parents and foster parents/kinship caregivers in the children's medical, educational, and any other appointments.
  - Recruitment of foster parents/kinship caregivers who are eager and capable of working in partnership with birth parents.
  - Recruitment of staff who understand the importance of these relationships and are committed to helping facilitate and support them.
  - Trainings for foster parents/kinship caregivers, social workers, parent partners and others on how they can best support these partnerships.
  - Policies that support information sharing, respect the culture of the family and also maintain confidentiality when needed.
- Access to community resources and supports for birth families and foster families/kinship caregivers.
  - Information about and support for birth families and foster families/kinship caregivers on building protective factors.

Some of the challenges to making positive changes in policy and practice may include:

- Often, birth parents and foster parents/kinship caregivers may have few opportunities to connect and work on building a strong relationship.
- Many foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents lack information about how to partner with each other and may hold misperceptions about each other's roles.
- The concept of partnerships between birth parents and foster parents/ kinship caregivers is new and many social workers, court personnel and others may still be learning how to best support these important relationships.
- Sometimes, information-sharing and confidentiality policies may restrict communication among birth parents and foster parents/kinship care providers.

A publication of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, created with parents, in collaboration with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative and Casey Family Programs.

