

Center for Advanced Studies
in **Child Welfare**

School of Social Work
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



CW360^o

a comprehensive look at a prevalent child welfare issue

Safety

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Well-Being

*Supporting Collaborative Birth and Foster Parent Relationships
Summer 2022*

From the Editors

Welcome to the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare's annual issue of *CW360°*. The focus of this issue is supporting birth and foster parent partnerships and fostering collaboration among caregivers for children in care. In this issue, we explore the history and dynamics of these relationships, promising programs to promote birth and foster parent connections, and hear from many folks with lived child welfare experience.

This conversation is critical as we think about how to best support children and families in the field and honor all relationships. Contributions in this year's *CW360°* address the nuance and layers inherent in creating a supportive environment for positive birth and foster parent relationships. We talk a lot in social work about "both and"—which can be readily applied to this topic. Kids can both live apart from a birth parent and maintain that relationship. A foster parent can both care deeply about a child and care deeply about the birth parent's well-being. A child welfare worker can both keep a child safe and work with members of the birth family.

This work is not easy. Family systems are complex and deserve skillful and thoughtful attention. Child welfare professionals often seek support and concrete tools about how to best engage birth families, foster families, and other important people in the lives of the children with whom they work.

As we prepare for each issue of *CW360°*, our team conducts an extensive literature review and an exploration of best practices in the field. We seek feedback from individuals who work on the specific topic or are well-positioned to write articles that offer insights on a range of policies, programs, and strategies to inform the child welfare practice community. *CW360°* is divided into three sections: overview, practice, and perspectives. The overview section takes a broader look at the importance of keeping kids connected to family and includes recent data on nationwide efforts related to collaborative relationship building to strengthen outcomes for families. The practice section features articles on promising programs that train professionals to work with system-impacted families—such as the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP), QPI, and CHERISH. We've included articles focused specifically on father engagement as well. The perspectives section features voices from birth parents, social workers, system-impacted youth, parent representation attorneys, and researchers. The issue should serve as a foundational guide to working collaboratively with birth and foster parents. We also hope to see more research done on this topic. Additionally, we have provided a resource guide to further support learning and growth. Note that we have removed the reference section from the printed editions of *CW360°* in order to make space for

additional content. You can find a full listing of the citations in PDF format on our website at z.umn.edu/CW360_2022.

We also want to acknowledge the variation in language when referring to parents, birth parents, caregivers, foster parents, resource families, kin providers etc. Depending on one's role and positionality, certain terms are more fitting than others. The field is adapting to this shifting terminology in the hopes of centering the voices of people with lived experience.

As foster parent Katie Biron notes, "For kids and families experiencing foster care, connectedness is essential to counterbalancing adversity and trauma related to removal and placement with substitute caregivers." It is essential that the child welfare workforce has the background knowledge, skills, and support to be able to navigate these relationships to ensure the best outcomes for children and families.

We know that the past couple of years have been challenging. We'd like to express a great appreciation for the dedication and hard work of professionals in the child welfare systems as well as those who have taken the time to contribute to this year's publication.

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A Brief History of Foster Care

JaeRan Kim, PhD

Throughout history, there were many reasons a child might be parentless. Some children were orphaned, some were born to impoverished parents who could not afford their care, and others were abandoned because of a disability. Children who were orphaned or unable to be cared for by their parents may have been sent to an orphanage or religious institution or worked

hereditary traits which made it more difficult to find appropriate family foster placements. The Delineator, a women's magazine focused on domestic life, began the Child Rescue campaign in 1907, employing a more sentimental lens to encourage more families to foster and adopt children and to assuage fears that children in need of care were dangerous.

Henry C. Kempe (1966) coined the phenomenon “battered child syndrome” to describe child abuse. The attention on child abuse led to increased numbers of children being placed in foster care. In the 1980s and 1990s the war on drugs pushed even greater numbers of children into the system, particularly African American children. Parental drug use (especially crack cocaine) among African Americans was disproportionately criminalized, leading to an influx of “crack babies” in the foster care system (Roberts, 2002). Catherine Rymph (2017) noted that “as foster care became more accessible to African Americans, it also became more punitive and more disparaged” (p. 176).

Those who open their homes to children in foster care often care deeply about helping a child in need, but old stereotypes about birth families and a continued failure by society to provide resources for families with financial, mental health, or other challenges persist.

as servants in a household in exchange for room and board (Boswell, 1998). How to respond to children in need of parental care has always reflected cultural and societal values about the vulnerability of children and the responsibilities of parents.

Historically, foster care has been known by different terms including “placing out” and “boarding out” (Hasci, 1995). Child placing movements such as the orphan trains were an initial attempt to move children out of institutions and urban tenement life and into rural family settings. Charles Loring Brace, the head of the New York Children's Aid Society, and other reformers believed children in orphanages and who begged on the streets suffered from an “urban environment and from their own parents, who were presumed to be unworthy individuals incapable of rearing children properly” (Hasci, 1995, p. 167). Their solution was to send these children by train to rural farming communities where they were taken in by families looking for labor – boys for farmhands and other trades and girls for domestic help. The program was somewhere between indenture and informal adoption. From 1855 to 1929 an estimated 200,000 children were placed out via the orphan train (Holt, 1994).

Poverty has also been connected to morality, and parents who struggled financially often were considered to have personal defects related to their inability to provide for their children. Other family characteristics were also used to justify a child's placement into foster care including being a single parent (this was especially true for female single parents), if the parent or child had a disability, if a child was born outside of marriage, and for parental actions seen as immoral such as gambling, alcohol use, or “ill” place of employment. Children whose parents were poor or had any of these other characteristics were seen as having “bad blood” – suffering from deficient

During World War II, maternal patriotism was used to appeal to women to be foster mothers willing to take in domestic children and an influx of British children sent to the U.S. to escape the war in Europe. As Catherine Rymph (2017) noted, child welfare professionals were attempting to encourage foster mothering as an alternative form of patriotism in a time when “Rosie the Riveter” was seen as the patriotic way to serve their country. Following the second world war, an emphasis on domestic life contributed to a surge in family building known as the baby boom. For couples who faced difficulty conceiving children, adoption and foster care were presented as alternative options. Becoming a foster parent was seen as altruistic and a way to experience parenting.

Child placing services for poor children were differentiated by a child's racial or ethnic heritage. While White European immigrant children were the focus of the orphan trains and other efforts to place children in family settings, the opposite happened to children of color. Native American children were removed from their families and communities and sent to boarding schools. African American children were excluded from most services and ended up in juvenile detention institutions or even adult prisons (Billingsley and Giovannoni, 1972; Child, 2016). For the most part, Native American and African American families and their children were ignored by state and federal child welfare organizations. In the 1950s the National Urban League ran a foster care and adoption program focused on African American children.

Throughout history, the media has played a large role in portraying foster parenting as a wholesome form of charity that provides opportunities for children to rise above their substandard genetic or environmental backgrounds. Foster care was a response to poverty-related neglect and other parental behaviors until the 1960s when physician

In some ways, foster care today looks very different than 100 years ago. However, many aspects have changed very little and some have changed for the worse. Children of color are excessively overrepresented in the foster care system while the recruitment and retention of foster parents of color remains disproportionately low. Poverty-related neglect is still one of the reasons children enter foster care, and negative views about families whose children end up in the system hamper reunification. In 1921, child welfare advocate Homer Folks challenged child welfare reformers to ask key questions about justifying foster care. He asked if foster care workers could truly say the harm done in removing a child is not more than letting them stay, and he questioned if assurances could be made about providing what foster care workers deemed missing or lacking in a home. One hundred years later many of us are asking these same questions. We have learned from the voices of those with lived experience in the foster care system that the answer to these questions too often is “No.” Those who open their homes to children in foster care often care deeply about helping a child in need, but old stereotypes about birth families and a continued failure by society to provide resources for families with financial, mental health, or other challenges persist. As a community who cares about the welfare of children, we need to think deeply about what other interventions could be implemented so that 100 years from now we can look back with pride at how far we have come.

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Fatherhood and co-parenting: Strategies for supporting co-parenting relationships from a fatherhood perspective

Mindy E. Scott, PhD; April Wilson, PhD; Andrea Vazzano, MPH; Samantha Ciaravino, MPH; Child Trends

Co-parenting plays an important role in shaping children's well-being (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010; Friend, et al., 2016). The term co-parents describes the relationship between any two or more adults, romantically together or not, who work together and share responsibility for raising a child (Talbot & McHale, 2004). Co-parenting relationships can exist between birth parents, grandparents, and other extended

States and may receive local, state, or federal funding. For example, the federal government funds many Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs through grants that are administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA). In addition to parenting and economic stability activities and services, OFA-funded

2. fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming, and
3. whether and how programs respond to those needs.¹

The study conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with 24 fatherhood program staff from nine fatherhood programs across the United States, 36 participating fathers, and 6 co-parents of participating fathers. Interviews with staff, fathers, and co-parents assessed perceptions of co-parenting and romantic relationship services, fathers' and co-parents' engagement in the services, and perspectives on how fatherhood programs support, or could better support, the needs of fathers and their families. *The findings from this study* provide insight into the ways in which relationship programming in fatherhood programs can address the diverse needs of fathers and their families (Vazzano, et al., 2021).

One finding from CHARMED that is particularly relevant for child welfare systems to consider is that fathers often viewed access to their child as a key challenge in their lives, with visitation sometimes dictated by the co-parent and/or legal systems. Spending time with children often requires navigating additional logistics and barriers. One father noted, "Because you got fathers, they can be right down the street, they can see their kids any day they want, just like going around the corner. Me, I got to set schedules. I got to set arrangements. I got to make plans."

One finding from CHARMED that is particularly relevant for child welfare systems to consider is that fathers often viewed access to their child as a key challenge in their lives, with visitation sometimes dictated by the co-parent and/or legal systems.

family members, or between birth parents and foster parents. For example, the Shared Parenting model partners foster parents with birth family members to help prepare all involved for reunification. Foster parents work to support positive, supportive relationships with birth parents while keeping the child's best interests in mind and helping the child develop secure attachments (NACAC, 2018).

Positive co-parenting relationships between parents/caregivers can be beneficial for a range of health and developmental outcomes for children. For instance, positive co-parenting relationships are linked to fewer behavior problems and better social skills in children (Eisenburg, et al., 2005). Moreover, negative or conflictual co-parenting relationships can be harmful to children. Children exposed to these types of relationships are at risk for behaviors like aggression and hyperactivity, poor social skills, slowed cognitive and language development, and difficulties managing their emotions (Eisenburg, et al., 2005; Belsky & Fearon, 2004; Cabrera, et al., 2012; Brown, et al., 2004).

Fathers play an important role in co-parenting their children, whether or not they live with them or are currently in a romantic relationship with the mother. Positive co-parenting relationships also can help to strengthen fathers' relationships with their children, as they are linked to greater father involvement (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010; Wood & Covington, 2014).

Human services programs designed specifically for fathers recognize the importance of positive co-parenting relationships for fathers and their families. A key goal for many fatherhood programs is to support fathers' co-parenting relationships in addition to their romantic relationships. Fatherhood programs operate in communities across the United

RF programming requires relationship education and activities to promote or sustain marriage (Claims Resolution Act, 2010). To meet this requirement, RF programs aim to improve relationship skills for co-parenting and romantic relationships. These skills often include communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving, among others (Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, 2020).

A recent qualitative study addressing co-parenting, healthy relationships, and marriage education for dads (CHARMED) conducted by *Child Trends* aimed to better understand

1. the approaches fatherhood programs use to support fathers' healthy romantic and co-parenting relationships,

¹This study was funded by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). For more information on study participants, methods, and publications, visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/coparenting-and-healthy-relationship-and-marriage-education-dads-charmed>.



In some instances this challenge stemmed from strained co-parenting relationships in which the co-parent, often the mother, limited a father's ability to see his children for long periods of time. A few fathers described how their co-parents limited their interactions with their children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vazzano, et al., 2022). In one case, when a father lost his job due to COVID-19 and became unable to pay his water bill, his co-parent reported him to child protective services (CPS). This father described being unable to see his child for weeks after that report.

In other instances, fathers described access to children as being limited by legal and social systems. Many fathers in the CHaRMED study were referred or mandated to participate in the fatherhood program through involvement

with their children, as well as their relationship with their co-parents (Eisenberg et al., 2005). Providing support to fathers navigating these systems can help better address their co-parenting relationships and promote their well-being as well as the well-being of their children.

An intentional focus on engaging fathers to support and strengthen family relationships has gained attention specifically for families involved in the child welfare system. For example, OFA encourages RF grantees to create strategic partnerships with child welfare agencies and organizations. It is important for child welfare agencies and fatherhood programs to partner together to ensure that fathers and paternal family members with children in the child welfare system maintain connections with their children and help establish permanency

n.d.). This resource describes “low resource” approaches that can be implemented quickly (i.e., a place to start) as well as more resource-intensive options that likely require slow, incremental approaches to implementation (i.e., something to strive for).

Other resources for supporting healthy relationships in fatherhood programs are also available, including a [resource for increasing engagement and tailoring services to fathers' strengths and needs](#) and one that provides [strategies for engaging co-parents in co-parenting relationship education](#) provided by fatherhood programs. Before implementing any of the recommended strategies, programs and agencies should assess whether it is safe to engage one or both co-parents. The CHaRMED resource for [supporting healthy relationships](#) in fatherhood programs provides guidance for assessing and promoting safety when considering co-parent engagement.

A study report summarizes additional findings and considerations for future practice and research related to addressing fathers' co-parenting and romantic relationships in fatherhood programs. Please visit this CHaRMED project page to access the report and other study publications: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/coparenting-and-healthy-relationship-and-marriage-education-dads-charmed>

It is important for child welfare agencies and fatherhood programs to partner together to ensure that fathers and paternal family members with children in the child welfare system maintain connections with their children and help establish permanency through reunification when appropriate.

with the legal system, including CPS and family court, or to fulfill conditions related to probation. Fatherhood program staff from two programs talked about how involvement with the child welfare system in particular created additional stress and strain on both co-parents. These staff noted that children were sometimes placed in foster care instead of placed with their fathers after being removed from the mother's home. They discussed that having children in foster care may result in complex co-parenting dynamics in which fathers are co-parenting with grandparents, other extended family members, foster parents, and even caseworkers. However, one program reported a few instances in which these complex co-parenting relationships were supportive and increased fathers' engagement with their children. For example, a staff member described how foster parents provided ways for a father to engage virtually with his children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

through reunification when appropriate (see resource guide available at childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/engaging/fathers). Additional federal efforts are underway to conduct direct engagement work within child welfare agency organizations to ensure fathers are included/considered in cases.²

An additional resource from the CHaRMED study provides [specific guidance fatherhood programs can offer fathers to help navigate or self-advocate within these legal and social systems](#). For example, programs can support fathers through one-on-one support, by identifying and training peer support specialists or mentors, (Peters et al., 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017) and by establishing and fostering key partnerships (National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse,

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²For more information on federal efforts to engage fathers in child welfare services, see the *Fathers and Continuous Learning study* (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/fathers-and-continuous-learning>).

Considerations for fathers of children involved in the child welfare system

Although not a direct focus of the study, the findings and practice implications from the CHaRMED study are relevant for child welfare and other social service agencies focused on engaging fathers in services and supporting co-parenting relationships as part of their own organization's policies and practices or through partnerships with fatherhood programs. As mentioned, many fathers in the CHaRMED study were involved in legal or social systems. Involvement in such systems can sometimes negatively affect fathers' overall well-being, involvement



QPI: Protecting and Nurturing Children's Well-Being Through Culture, Practice and Policy Changes Supporting Parent Partnership

Jennifer Rodriguez, JD

While partnerships between the parents of children in foster care are often discussed through adult perspectives, the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) firmly believes the single most important reason to support partnerships between birth and resource parents is about the child. The experiences children and youth share about foster care are frequently defined by trauma, including disruption and loss of their most important relationships. We have unprecedented scientific knowledge about the impacts of that trauma on a child's life trajectory: on future relationships, brain development, health, behavior, self-concept, and even economic and social burdens. A recent policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics declares that toxic stress experienced by children has such extreme consequences that repair through a focus on providing children safe, stable, and nurturing relationships requires at least two generations (Garner & Yogman, 2021).

While the trauma children and youth experience before care and while in care has been extensively discussed, the changes needed to reduce system-inflicted trauma have not been examined enough. For children who must enter foster care the child welfare system, at minimum, should not inflict further trauma. At best, child welfare should be a positive intervention that leaves children better off. Nearly eighty years of child development research makes clear that increasing healthy relationships is the most powerful intervention. It's only logical that a working relationship between the birth and resource parent can both increase healthy relationships for children and mitigate their stress and loss. Partnership between resource and birth parents can improve the well-being of children and youth in foster care in numerous ways, including:

- Easing children's fear and anxiety after removal
- Providing children comfort and familiarity when relationships with their extended family and friends are preserved, recipes for comfort foods can be shared, and bedtime routines can be maintained
- Preserving children's culture, language, and traditions.

The impacts of partnership are immense for children of all ages: from babies who can't verbalize that they are used to sleeping with the light on, to teenagers who need consistency in decision-making from the caregivers in their lives about expectations for technology

and dating. These partnerships are key from the moment a child sets foot in the home of their first resource parent to the day they return home and need the ability to maintain relationships with resource parents, foster siblings, and friends they acquired in care so they don't experience more losses.

This goal of reorienting child welfare to prioritize children's relationships is the mission of QPI, national systems change effort

country to identify and implement practice and policy reforms that address these barriers and embed birth and resource parent partnership as a regular part of child welfare practice. While co-parenting is only one of several policy areas critical to QPI, it touches every element of the system. QPI has learned it is impossible to effectively support co-parenting in child welfare through implementation of only a few practices. Child welfare agencies and courts

While co-parenting is only one of several policy areas critical to QPI, it touches every element of the system.

adopted by more than 80 communities across the nation. QPI aims to transform foster care agencies into relationship-based systems whose primary goal is to ensure that each child develops and maintains strong, positive relationships and has effective parenting while in care. When YLC launched QPI in 2008, our priority was to identify what system changes were needed so that children's daily life in foster care could be positive. To do this, we went directly to the experts: youth, foster parents, and birth parents. Our question was simple: What gets in the way of every child in foster care receiving excellent parenting every day? Participants identified barriers systems enacted between birth and resource families as a pervasive problem. Barriers to co-parenting were reflected in every aspect of systems: recruitment and training of resource parents, removal, placement and permanency practices, court processes, supports for families, transitions procedures, and caseworker training and evaluation.

For the last fourteen years, QPI has worked in partnership with child welfare agencies, courts, parents, youth, and staff across the

have to make significant culture, practice, and policy changes throughout their system — many of which do not immediately seem connected to partnership but are foundational. For example, agencies had to commit to:

- Ensuring that resource parents were treated as respected valued partners in order for parents to feel supported in engaging in the co-parenting relationship. This involved including resource parents regularly in decision-making processes, encouraging thoughtful risk-taking, and providing support when conflict arose.
- Revising licensing investigation processes to assure resource parents that if a complaint arose as a result of a close working relationship, it would be handled fairly.
- Revisiting the approach to concurrent planning to not penalize resource parents committed to reunification and not cause unnecessary conflict in the relationship between parents.
- Ensuring courts and counsel so parents, children, and the agency understood the value of co-parenting.



- Revising visitation practice.
- Ensuring information-sharing policies allowed resource parents the information they needed to work with the birth parent.
- Establishing peer supports for both resource parents and birth parents as they navigated the ups and downs of a complex relationship.
- Setting clear expectations for staff and aligning training and evaluation.
- Listening to youth's opinions about the relationship between their birth and resource parents.

These reforms require strong leadership and long-term commitment to change, but many of the practices do not require significant financial or staff resources to implement. For example, during Louisiana QPI meetings, youth and birth parents shared how upsetting it was to not be able to talk to each other at the time of initial placement. In response, QPI worked with Louisiana to develop a practice called QPI “comfort calls,” based on a simple call facilitated by the caseworker between the resource and birth parent at the time of placement. This practice has spread within the QPI network and is now being implemented by many jurisdictions across the country as one component of their reform, including through

legislative change in Minnesota and Florida. All the available data shows the changes supporting co-parenting are effective in improving children’s experience in care. The data also shows that what’s good for children is

For the hundreds of thousands of children who spent their childhoods in foster care and have lived the consequences of growing up feeling unloved, the effort to realign the system to strengthen, preserve, and coordinate

Research conducted by the University of Maryland evaluating QPI demonstrates how partnership practices improve resource parents’ experiences and satisfaction.

also good for the adults who love them. Recent data gathered through QPI’s data initiative indicates that practices such as QPI comfort calls support successful reunification. Research conducted by the University of Maryland evaluating QPI demonstrates how partnership practices improve resource parents’ experiences and satisfaction. Anecdotally, child welfare and court leaders and staff have shared that partnership reforms result in changes that make their work more satisfying and meaningful. Most importantly to QPI, children’s circle of adults who love and care for them expands. In 2021, QPI received the federal Children’s Bureau Champion Award for “Reshaping Foster Care as a Support for Families,” signifying that the effort to put relationships, particularly parenting relationships, first for children in care is the future for child welfare.

relationships between adults who will love a child throughout their life is long overdue. *Jennifer Rodriguez is an attorney and the Executive Director of the Youth Law Center, a national public interest law firm that has worked for four decades to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems so children and youth can thrive. At YLC, Jennifer worked to build and co-found the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI). Jennifer’s own experience growing up in both foster care and juvenile justice institutions and her previous work organizing thousands of directly impacted youth to lead policy reform drives her advocacy and her commitment to urgent systems transformation. Contact jrodriguez@ylc.org.*



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Exploring The Benefits of Cultivating Positive Working Relationships Between Birth and Foster Parent

Ericka M. Lewis, PhD, LMSW

High quality foster parenting is vital to ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in need. Foster families provide stable living environments where children can develop secure attachments and form trusting relationships with caregivers – all of which are needed for children’s social, emotional, and behavioral development. In addition to providing a safe place to live, another important role of foster families is to ensure effective care coordination for youth in care; foster parents develop and maintain working relationships with birth parents, foster care agency personnel, and other stakeholders. These working relationships are a critical component of successful family reunification and have been linked to birth parent and child outcomes (Nesmith et al., 2017).

Previous studies have found that less tension between birth and foster parents during family visits correlates with increases in visiting frequency and helps birth parents maintain their parenting role which, in turn, is related to stronger birth parent-child attachment (McWey & Mullis, 2004; Spielfogel & Leathers, 2022). In fact, foster parent engagement with and support for birth parents can reduce parental stress and alleviate fears of having a child in the foster care system (Morrison et al., 2011; Nesmith, 2013). It is usually in the child’s best interest for birth and foster parents to maintain positive and supportive relationships; however, these relationships can be difficult to manage, and agency policies do not always clarify how this relationship can be strengthened. Moreover, foster parents are not commonly encouraged to build a relationship with birth parents and this inadvertently sets up a negative dynamic between the caretakers most invested in the child’s well-being. The role of foster parents in providing continuity of care and promoting child well-being and the impact of working relationships between birth and foster parents on family reunification outcomes is substantial. Thus, it is imperative



By centering the needs of children and their birth families, QPI shifts power away from the agency-based professionals toward foster and birth parents to improve outcomes for children.

to explore strategies to engage foster parents as invested and valued caregivers and equip them with the skills that improve their coparenting relationship with birth parents.

Exploring QPI’s Impact on the Birth and Foster Parent Relationship

Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is one effort to promote high quality foster care by improving partnerships among foster care stakeholders. QPI is a systems-change approach by child welfare workers designed to expressly address the practices of foster parents and their support by helping agencies incorporate evidence-based practices and policies (Youth Law Center, 2020). The findings presented in this overview are part of a larger process evaluation of QPI. In that larger study, foster care stakeholders were interviewed about their engagement in QPI implementation. The study also explored foster parent perceptions of QPI satisfaction and usefulness (Lewis et al., 2022).

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 foster parents at participating QPI sites (i.e., foster care agencies). We sought to capture foster parents’ perceptions about the impact of QPI practice on their interactions with birth parents and their capacity to build effective, trusting working relationships across foster care stakeholders. Foster parents shared that

QPI had positive effects on their relationships with birth parents, specifically regarding communications and interactions. Participants described the shift from a more distant relationship between the birth and foster parents to a collaborative partnership and largely attributed the improvements in relationships to QPI’s cultivation of a team-based approach to meeting the needs of the child. Foster parents shared that the approach led to 1) better defining roles and expectations of caregivers, 2) challenging biases and assumptions held by birth and foster parents, and 3) creating opportunities for open communication between birth and foster parents.

Theme 1: Articulation of Roles

Participants discussed how QPI’s work to define the expectations of caregivers and communication of these expectations to all relevant stakeholders helped facilitate improvements in the birth and foster parent relationship. For example, a foster parent shared that QPI helped the birth family understand that her role is to provide them with support as they work towards getting their child back. Providing clarification on the roles and expectations of birth and foster parents from the beginning helped reduce potential tensions and facilitated relationship building. One foster parent noted the change in their relationship with birth parents, stating “I guess [birth parents] are realizing that I’m here to work with them and help them get their kid back.”

Theme 2: Challenging Biases and Assumptions

Foster parents discussed how QPI enabled them to acknowledge and address biases they held about birth parents. Foster parents shared that QPI helped them to appreciate birth parents’ experiences and develop more empathy for them. Foster parents also reported that having more empathy affected the way they interacted with birth parents. One foster parent couple explained:

We had the impression that we were just not gonna like this guy, and then we met him and immediately realized our first impression was off. We told him “You can call. You can text. You can whatever,” and along the way, we maintained that. He called every night faithfully to sing his son a lullaby. He did that for five months until [his son] went home.

Theme 3: Open Communication

Foster parents shared that QPI’s approach empowered birth parents to be more forthcoming with them about their circumstances and support needs without fear of losing their child. One foster parent echoed this sentiment, “Now it’s like a relationship, almost a friendship, you know? I feel like that’s definitely improved, I think. It’s allowed for more honesty, and this bio [parent] has shared more.” Foster parents discussed how the birth-foster parent relationship often extended well beyond reunification. They explained that through QPI, birth parents view them as an additional source of support that they can call upon in the future.

It is important to note the role foster care agencies played in strengthening the birth and foster parent relationship. Foster parents explained that agency staff encouraged their efforts to provide support to birth parents. For example, one foster parent shared how her social worker would consistently check in on her and her partner to inquire about how their relationship with the birth parent was progressing: “[Agency staff] are making sure

that we understand our role in it and actively engaging us and following up and saying, ‘Okay. How is your relationship with [the biological] dad? What would you need to make that better?’ Our social worker would ask those questions. She would follow up and make sure that we were doing our part to work with the parents and have that open communication.”

Implications for Practice

To date, QPI is one of the first initiatives to advance foster care system reform efforts by engaging foster parents to be active participants in the change process. By centering the needs of children and their birth families, QPI shifts power away from the agency-based professionals toward foster and birth parents to improve outcomes for children. Our study findings suggest that utilizing a family systems approach, wherein foster parents are intentional about recognizing and affirming birth parents’ role in the lives of children, fostered a more inclusive support system for children in care. Strengthening these relationships may be the first step in dismantling the negative assumptions often made about birth parents and reimagining the roles of birth and foster parents in family reunification. Despite the potential benefits of improved birth and foster parent relationships, establishing these relationships remains challenging for some foster parents (Martinez et al., 2016; Van Holen et al., 2015). Therefore, additional training to help foster parents establish rapport with birth families and clarify roles and

expectations should be implemented (Nesmith et al., 2017; Spielfogel & Leathers, 2022). It may also be beneficial for agencies to explore more opportunities for collaboration between birth and foster parents beyond the context of routine visitation.

In most cases, children and families benefit from agencies incorporating strategies that promote frequent, positive interactions between birth and foster parents; however, agencies may still struggle on how to best support foster parents in maintaining these relationships (ACYF, 2020). For example, a recent study of the evolution of birth-foster parent relationship found that initial interactions between birth and foster parents were critical to establishing collaborative relationships, yet caseworkers were not proactive in creating or supporting these relationships, as few caseworkers spoke about how they helped “structure channels of communication” (Spielfogel & Leathers, 2022, p. 8). This may be a missed opportunity for child welfare workers to serve as effective agents of change in supporting better relationships between birth and foster parents. Therefore, more training is needed on best practices for professionals, such as child welfare workers, to prepare foster parents to effectively engage with birth parents.

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Resources, relationships and reflection: How to support workforce professionals in supporting and nurturing the relationships between substitute caregivers and birth families

Kate Rickord, MA, LP

At the earliest stage of out-of-home placement, there is often a lack of connection or relationship established between the parent and the substitute caregiver. Workforce professionals are key partners to cultivating this relationship between parents and caregivers. How do we support the caseworkers and social workers who are the connection point between families, service providers, and the court system? One approach is to find the right balance of resources, relationships, and reflection.

Resources include tangible items to help our workforce build relationships between caregivers. This can include education on child development, attachment, or how trauma influences interpersonal dynamics. Materials such as the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership Relationship Guide or the 2020 Initial Call Stature help people gain information and ideas. Another resource example is clearly living out the values a system holds. Many counties and agencies utilize the Signs of Safety (2022) approach when working within child protection. This model provides anchor points for the caseworker to do their work from and a place to return to when things become complicated or confusing, which it will. Bringing these resources forward in meetings, supervisions, and with other service providers helps weave them into the fabric of the work, rather than simply knowing they are available.



Example of a Words and Pictures safety plan from signsofsafety.net.

Widening perspectives to learn from youth, parents, and substitute caregivers is a trio effect; it includes resource, relationship, and reflection. Caseworkers have the awareness of how to make an initial (comfort) call or have

Resources, relationships, and reflection have similar “costs,” which include meaningful commitment of leadership to support the workforce and being given the adequate amount of time to spend in the present moment. Stress is most prevalent when we are focused on the past or thinking about the future. To support our professional workforce, we must give them space to learn, relate, and reflect with others.

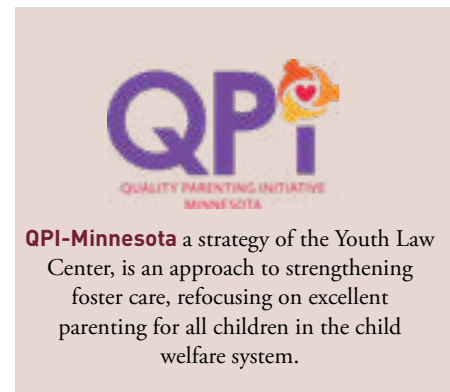
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How do we support the caseworkers and social workers who are the connection point between families, service providers, and the court system?

Healthy relationships include trust and tension. To help our professional workforce support parent-caregiver relationships, we too must experience building trust with others and holding tension together. Peer-to-peer support is key for normalizing experiences and generating solutions for effective relationship-building. Encouraging conversations of successes and challenges amongst peers and with leadership enhances our professional workforce to stay engaged in supporting others.

We cannot underestimate the power of reflection. Reflective practices, whether within a supervisory relationship or group format, can help us pay attention to how relationships influence other relationships, gain insight into what may be present but outside of our primary focus, and become comfortable when someone else can see and understand us.

icebreaker meetings between caregivers. Yet, there is richness in understanding how these moments truly impact the trajectory of a child and family's life together. As Mikala Dickerson, a QPI-MN Champion and birth parent says, “My willingness to fight and just working with everyone—that’s what brought my kids home.” This could not have been done without the social workers and foster parents working with her and her children. When a caseworker is supporting a family, does the system encourage them to ask for feedback and process with the family how it feels to be in relationship with the other person? Not as a reaction to a complaint, but as a proactive way to demonstrate commitment to the partnership. We often think “No news is good news.” Perhaps a different perspective is to ask for the good news with intention.



The Importance of Birth Family Relationships

Jennifer Jacobs, PhD and Stephanie Herrmann, MEd

Emma's mother abandoned her shortly after birth, and her father raised her until his own struggles made it impossible to properly care for her. Emma entered foster care at age 5, then was moved a dozen times in six years. Her only brother was adopted, and she has had no contact. She remembers their close relationship and longs to reunite with him.

At Connect Our Kids, we hear stories like Emma's every day. They resonate with us on a human level; most humans have a deep-seated need to understand their own origins. For

which they are being removed. Therefore, if a child must enter care, great effort should be taken to keep them connected to familiar and supportive relationships.

One particularly important set of relationships is with the birth family. Although the birth parents were apparently unable to adequately care for the child, their value to the child extends beyond this task. Family connections, to those living, as well as to ancestors, are crucial pieces of the identity and self-story for a child. Even understanding why

Beyond the positive societal outcomes, every child deserves the dignity of belonging to a community. Ideally this includes people with a shared history, who understand their unique stories and who are personally invested in a child's success.

children in foster care, this can lead to identity issues. Through constant outreach with our software users, we have heard repeatedly how reconnecting a child with supportive family or kin can be transformative. Helping to build lifetime connections for those in care can seem daunting. However, the difference between finding a child a bed for the night and finding a child a supportive relationship can alter a child's life trajectory.

Relationships Matter

Children who enter foster care are often disconnected, sometimes quite suddenly, from their entire immediate and extended family, as well as their neighbors, friends, school community, and home. This can be disorienting and damaging, and sometimes it can be as traumatic as the conditions from

certain people didn't show up for a child in their time of need can be a healing part of the child's understanding of their story.

Daniel, a teen in foster care, is a good example of this. His life experience and self-story was that his own family had no "good people." This negative sense of himself led him to resist an adoption opportunity with his caring foster family. His social worker used our search tools to help research his family history. She found that Daniel had several distinguished ancestors, including a well-loved pastor, and an esteemed medical doctor. Daniel's reaction was disbelief, then a shifted perspective about himself and it allowed him to finally consider adoption.

Long-lasting supportive connections are crucial. Leaving foster care without any of these connections can have a significant



Connect Our Kids is a non-profit dedicated to leveraging technology to find families, build connections, and create community for children in the foster care system. Connect Our Kids' free technology tools fast-track family search and engagement, help social workers identify family and community connections, organize contact information and networks, and generate and share reports in a multi-user platform built for team collaboration.

impact on outcomes. Transition-age youth and young adults often fare poorly in education, employment, and other outcomes, including a higher risk of ending up in criminal justice or other systems (Congressional Research Service, 2019). By age 26, two-thirds of those who age out of foster care will have experienced incarceration, homelessness, or they will be dead (Courtney et al., 2011). Many will become human trafficking victims. Keeping at-risk children within supportive family and community networks nurtures their emotional development and reduces long-term negative outcomes.

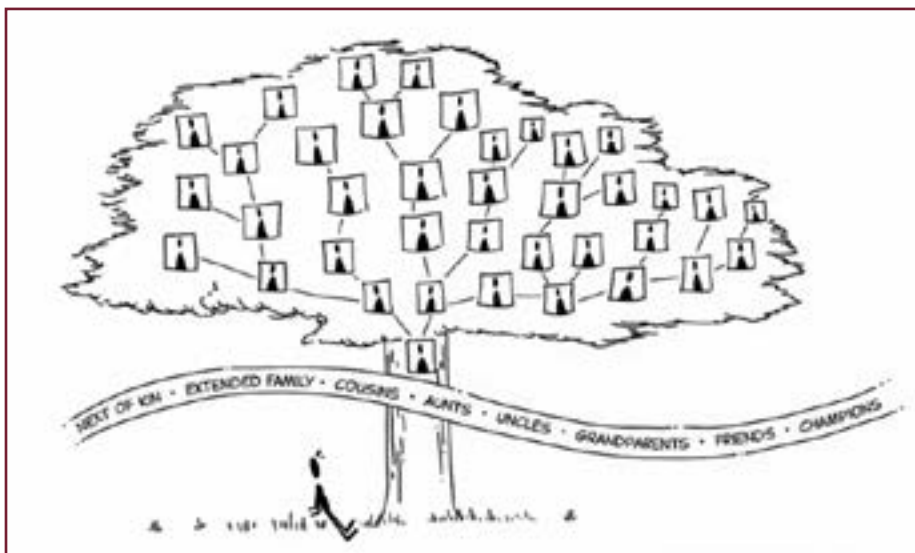
Beyond the positive societal outcomes, every child deserves the dignity of belonging to a community. Ideally this includes people with a shared history, who understand their unique stories and who are personally invested in a child's success.

What does science tell us?

Clear data isolating the impact of family separation within the foster care context are not plentiful. Qualitative accountings from foster care alumni describe trauma from the environment from which they were removed, the foster care system itself, and abusive adoptions as well as incredibly positive placements and adoptions in which the child was loved and where meaningful relationships persist (Rhodes-Carter, 2008 & Todd, 2012).

The field of immigration has conducted a number of studies on family separation. A remarkable study from the University of New Mexico found that family separation had an impact on mental health that is similar to the impact of beating and torture (Miller et al., 2018).

A five-year study of children in Boston and San Francisco who were separated from their parents due to immigration status found significantly increased rates of anxiety and depression compared to their peers who did



From Connect Our Kids: Finding Families for Foster Kids. Watch on YouTube: youtu.be/eMivJgf7RNA

not experience separation (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

A majority of children in foster care are there due to neglect, not abuse. This suggests that immigrant children separated from their parents may have similarities to children in care. Attachment theory tells us that if a child has an attachment tie with a caregiver, separation from that caregiver will be painful and likely to lead to trauma (Perry & Winfrey, 2021).

How can we help?

Social workers and others serving children in care need tools and resources to help quickly identify and contact potential family and community. Following identification and initial contact, deeper conversations on healing trauma can begin. There is an upfront cost in time and energy, and this is where the long-term value of building connections often becomes a victim to the short-term imperative of finding beds for the night.

We offer free tools to help professionals conduct this upfront work. Our users tell us that even if they have no time, our search tools allow them to find useful emails and phone numbers faster, and so they may have fewer calls to make. Children don't cycle back to them as frequently from poorly chosen placements.

However, these tools are only useful in the hands of skilled and willing professionals. To be

successful, agencies must make family finding a priority and support their case managers' efforts to do more work upfront in exchange for better child outcomes and decreased workloads later.

Success can be measured in many ways

Even with extensive family finding attempts, identifying a willing and supportive family member is not always possible.

Zeke is a smart and resilient 15-year-old boy who has lived in multiple foster homes over the years. When a new child advocate took over Zeke's file, she noticed an existing family network already created on Connect our Kids technology platform. In it, she found a strong connection to a community mentor. Speaking with him, she gained a profoundly deeper understanding of Zeke's story. She also learned that he had a previous foster family that loved him deeply and had wanted to adopt him at a time he was unadoptable. By reconnecting Zeke with this foster family, they were able to heal old misconceptions and re-establish a new relationship. Zeke has now moved back into this foster family's home and they have hopes for a permanent adoption in the future. Having family connections mapped out helped a child advocate recognize that sometimes the right connections have already been made.

Evidence indicates that a child's resilience most often relies on having at least one consistent, positive relationship to draw upon when life becomes stressful ("InBrief," 2015).

This significant relationship may not be from a child's birth or extended family. Teachers, coaches, or mentors can also provide the long-term supportive relationships a child needs.

Remember Emma? Her social worker used our tools to reach out to kinship connections. She quickly connected with an uncle who, upon seeing Emma's photo, was amazed by the family resemblance. With the support of the social worker, Emma and her uncle have begun building a relationship with hopes of adoption.

While it is clear every child's situation is unique, child welfare professionals can be successful in helping build life-long connections for every child. They should be supported in this often-challenging work because it is crucial to the lives of our most vulnerable children.

In these stories of children served by Connect Our Kids software tools, we have changed the children's names to protect privacy. More stories of the impact made by incredible social workers and CASAs finding connections can be found at www.connectourkids.org/blog.

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The Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth (WIT-Y)

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota has partnered with Anu Family Services to develop the Well-being Indicator Tool for Youth (WIT-Y), a self-assessment tool for youth aged 15-21 years. The WIT-Y allows youth to explore their well-being across eight domains: Safety and Security, Relationships, Mental Health, Cognitive Health, Physical Health, Community, Purpose, and Environment.

The WIT-Y consists of three components:

The WIT-Y Assessment, The WIT-Y Snapshot, and The WIT-Y Blueprint.

For additional information visit: z.umn.edu/wity



Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare



Why Kids Need You to Support Relationships Between Parents and Substitute Caregivers

Katie Biron, BSN, BSN

One common misperception among resource parents is that the best thing to do for a child who has been removed from their parents due to abuse or neglect is to sever all ties and give the child a fresh start. However, research shows that this “fresh start” perspective contributes to the trauma experienced by a child placed in out-of-home care, and maintaining the relationships the child had before going into care helps to counterbalance this same trauma. This article will explain why investing time and energy into relationships between parents and caregivers is essential to protect children from the effects of trauma caused by removal.

The act of separating a child is traumatic, even for newborns. A summation of traumatic childhood experiences is summarized by one’s ACE (adverse childhood experiences) score. Research has shown that individuals with higher ACE scores are at increased risk of developing physical, social and emotional dysfunction (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Children typically enter foster care with an average of three to four ACES (primarily for living with parents struggling with mental health issues, substance use disorder, or domestic violence) (Felitti et al., 1998; Bruskas & Tessin, 2013).

Critical to the child’s ability to tolerate high stress events is the presence of a consistent parent or caring adult who is available to provide a buffer to that stress. The stress response turns toxic when a challenging situation doesn’t end, or when there is no adult

be intense, but builds resiliency by teaching children to navigate difficult situations.

In contrast, the stress experienced by a child upon removal and placement with a substitute caregiver is more toxic in nature. Upon removal, children experience great uncertainty. Typically, the act of removal occurs suddenly, with no advance warning of the impending event. The child loses most of their important relationships (pets, friends, teachers, classmates, siblings, relatives, etc.) in an instant. Placed in a new home with strangers and expected to adjust to the rules and expectations of the new family, this type of stress feels very different to the child than predictable stress: It feels life threatening because the child did not expect to be removed from their home and there is no clear timeline for reunification. The result is a significant impact on the child’s day-to-day existence. This type of stress becomes all-consuming to the child or youth, and the brain becomes sensitized to operating in this heightened state of constant, ambiguous stress. This ambiguous stress affects the child by creating vulnerability.

Fortunately, there are ways to help the child. As Dr. Bruce Perry stated, “Connectedness has the power to counterbalance adversity.” What this means is that as the adversity in a child’s life increases, we must prioritize and increase the child’s relational health by facilitating and supporting relationships that will buffer that child from the impact of toxic stress.

For kids and families experiencing

For kids and families experiencing foster care, connectedness is essential to counterbalancing adversity and trauma related to removal and placement with substitute caregivers.

to help the child process the experience. When a child’s stress activation response stays active for an extended period, damage is done to the child’s brain and body (Felitti et al., 1998).

Predictable stress-inducing events may feel extreme at the moment, but several factors differentiate this type of stress from the toxic, ongoing stress experienced by children in foster care. Predictable stress has known components – the child is aware that the stressful experience is approaching, the stress is time-limited, and not life threatening. Regardless of the outcome of the stressful event at home, the child’s relationships and day-to-day experiences stay the same: The child returns to the same house, with the same family members, and sleeps in their own bed. This type of stress can

foster care, connectedness is essential to counterbalancing adversity and trauma related to removal and placement with substitute caregivers. For these reasons, it is critical that those of us working in child welfare prioritize and support relationships such as the parent child relationship, sibling relationships, and the relationship between the parents and the substitute caregiver(s).

In addition to mitigating the stress of removal, children and youth experience benefits when their parents and substitute caregivers work in harmony to support the child. Children are acutely aware when there is a strained or adversarial relationship between parents and caregivers. Conversely, children are reassured and comforted when



Laura (mom) and Katie (resource parent).

they see all the important adults in their life working collaboratively to support the child. In addition, when parents and caregivers work together, children do not experience divided loyalties and do not have to choose who to love. Instead, these children greatly benefit from being surrounded by adults who love and care for them and have a vested interest in supporting that child’s success. Finally, the stressors and unpredictability around the child’s transitions while in care (transitions to and from visits, while planning for reunification, and following reunification or other forms of permanency), can be thoughtfully planned and carried out when parents and substitute caregivers have a positive working relationship. Regardless of the permanency outcome, when a parent and substitute caregiver have built a child-centered relationship, the child can continue to have connection with all the loving adults in their lives, which further mitigates the impact of foster care on the child’s long-term outcome.

In conclusion, prioritizing relationships between parents and caregivers can have significant positive implications for children and youth who must be separated from their parents and should be a priority for all child welfare stakeholders.

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The Partnership Possibilities in Kinship Navigator Programs

Ali Caliendo, PhD

Kintsugi, which means “golden repair” in Japanese, is the art of repairing broken pottery with gold adhesive. The result is a repaired item that doesn't hide the history of brokenness but celebrates the process of repair. Delicate gold lines add beauty to the new vessel, showing the strength of healing. Kintsugi shows us that breaking down might be the first chapter of a story, but it's not the last.

It is fitting that the word “kin” is in this art form because that is the promise of kinship care – when the extended family steps up to raise children after things break down for parents. Kinship care starts from a place of trauma, but there is power in the family system to facilitate deep healing.

Kinship caregivers often arrive at caregiving via crisis – when something has broken. Caregivers make quick decisions, often without having all the information to make the best decision for their family. Kinship Navigator programs exist across the county to fill this gap by providing information, referral, and support to individuals parenting a relative or fictive kin's child.

Kinship Navigator clients are kinship caregivers first. The core job of a Navigator program is to help stabilize the kinship home by providing accurate information, referrals, case management, and support activities to help caregivers parent vulnerable children. Kinship families often don't have any additional resources, so Navigator programs are the hub to ensuring that kinship families have what they need to raise healthy children.

However, in its current definition in the Social Security Act, Kinship Navigator programs are not required to provide pathways for children to reunify with their parents. Outside of the child welfare system, is there an ethical responsibility to help all kinship families understand safe pathways home for children? If so, this obligation may start with re-envisioning the role of Kinship Navigator program services.

This obligation is even more pressing as states implement Families First Prevention Services Act [FFPSA]. FFPSA focuses on keeping children with kinship families to avoid the legal separation of children from their parents into the foster care system. The majority of children in kinship care already live with relatives outside of the oversight of the child welfare system, and FFPSA may accelerate the shift of children in nonparental care from the formal foster care system to more informal kinship systems of care. For all of the child welfare system's flaws, one of the positive aspects of the system is a legal pathway to parent and child reunification. This pathway home for children is far murkier outside of the child welfare system.



In addition, a safe path home is challenging to implement without external support. In fact, kinship caregivers and parents are often pitted against each other by our state and federal programs designed to support children. For example, most kinship families have access to a financial benefit called “child-only TANF” out of the state's welfare division. However, for kinship caregivers to receive this necessary financial help to raise children, they must cooperate with the state to order the parents to pay child support.

Kinship support advocates are facing a precarious transition in child welfare with the implementation of the FFPSA. One of the

for all children physically separated from their parents to have the potential for a way back.

Second, Kinship Navigator programs should call out policies, practices, and laws that harm one role of the kinship triad at the expense of another. Instead, services should always support where the child is living in the short term while considering the support the parents or caregiver may need to provide for the longer-term best interest of the child.

Finally, innovative kinship navigator programs could add services to their family stabilization models, such as trauma-informed family therapy for all members of the kinship triad, safety planning, and birth parent peer and community support. Family mediation processes that include the birth parent can assist the kinship family in thinking through when it might be appropriate for children to return home and what community supports are needed to enable this transition. Family mediation can also help families determine healthy co-parenting options or appropriate permanency options for children when reunification is not possible.

Navigator programs can never be the glue that puts families back together; only families

Navigator programs can never be the glue that puts families back together; only families can do that. But Navigator programs can create space and opportunity for healing and repair processes and start offering parent partnership services beyond stabilizing kinship families.

services available for federal funding as part of a prevention plan is Kinship Navigator Programs. While most prevention services are designed to support the child remaining in the parental home, kinship care does not avoid the trauma resulting from the physical separation of children from their parents. There is still a broken parent-child relationship that the family must address. With so much of the parental separation occurring outside of the child welfare system, Kinship Navigator Programs can play a more significant role in supporting family healing.

Currently, most Kinship Navigator services only support families to find initial stability. However, Kinship Navigator programs are well-positioned to support more profound healing in families in three ways.

First, Navigator programs should be well versed in understanding the kinship families' needs and the corresponding legal and resource options for the kinship triad of caregivers, children, and parents. Kinship Navigator Programs should offer accurate information on all options for the kinship triad and offer family mediation so all family members understand critical decisions and timelines. It's essential

can do that. But Navigator programs can create space and opportunity for healing and repair processes and start offering parent partnership services beyond stabilizing kinship families.

It's rare to speak with a grandma who says she didn't have hope that her child could be a someday parent. Navigator programs can be a significant part of that hope by incorporating support for birth parents who may need extra help to stabilize their own lives and parent their children safely. By working with families and organizations that support parents, calling out when systems pit caregivers against parents, advocating for policy change, and helping kinship families navigate the complex legal options, Kinship Navigator programs will facilitate healing conversations.

Families can envision what's possible in these healing moments, creating something beautiful from the breaks- their golden repair. The goal of Navigator Program services of the future is to support families as they access their power to be part of deep healing that restores relationships and creates generational change.

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Relationships Matter: Building Lasting Birth and Foster Parent Partnerships

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance

Building and supporting relationships between birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers is an important step in creating a culture change leading to more effective policies and practices for children and families. Children are more likely to thrive when the important adults in their lives build relationships and cooperate with each other and share responsibilities and decision-making. Six years ago, three organizations came together to look at the research, provide tools, and support implementation of strategies to help birth and foster parents build these critical relationships.

This commitment led to the formation of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) in 2016 to support a national movement of birth parents, foster families, kinship caregivers, and staff focused on 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 the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs.

Since 1979, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance (ctfalliance.org) and its members have worked with communities and multiple systems to strengthen all families. Since 2006, the alliance has developed and partnered with networks of parents to elevate their voices to policymakers and to join with them in developing policies and practices that help support families and lead to better outcomes for children and youth.

In 2008, Youth Law Center (ylc.org) founded a research-based initiative – the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) – to prioritize quality parenting in child welfare. Through QPI, child welfare agencies partner with parents, caregivers, and youth to institute practices and policies that support excellent parenting of children in foster care. One of the first issues identified by early QPI sites as a barrier to providing excellent parenting to children was the absence of practices and policies supporting co-parenting among birth and foster parents. Over the past decade, QPI sites across the country began implementing new practices and programs to support co-parenting.

Casey Family Programs (casey.org) 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,

two United States 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.

The BFPP promotes lasting relationships between birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers to support families and to help child welfare systems improve their practices around supporting these relationships. Through the BFPP, birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers work together to:

- keep children 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.

To facilitate the development of these important relationships, the BFPP members and supporting organizations created two complementary publications (found in resources):

The *Birth and foster parent partnership: A relationship building guide* was created to help build respectful and supportive relationships between birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers to meet the needs of the children in care and strengthen their families. It includes four relationship-building topics – building the relationship, supporting the relationship, keeping the relationship strong while working with the system, and keeping the relationship strong after the family leaves the system. It includes recommendations from and for birth parents and foster parents/kinship care providers on ways they can build stronger relationships and work collaboratively with the child welfare worker and other service providers.

The *Birth and foster parent partnership: A state and local leader's guide to building a strong policy and practice foundation* shares lessons learned from QPI jurisdictions and the national BFPP movement about culture, practice, and policy transformation. This resource

Benefits of birth and foster parents/kinship caregiver partnerships

Early research and field knowledge confirm the benefits to children of these partnerships in:

1. ensuring parents have the basic health, developmental, social, and emotional information to meet children's needs
2. ensuring children feel the security of knowing the adults who they rely on are working together in their interests
3. coordinating adequate health, mental health, education, and other services
4. maintaining the relationships that are important to children and youth
5. improving stability and continuity for children and youth in foster care
6. encouraging the development of natural supports that can help strengthen families
7. supporting parents in building their own protective factors to help them reunite with their children and achieve stability following reunification.

provides strategies for creating the right conditions for culture changes that facilitate strong birth and foster parent partnerships. The practices, policies, and implementation tips included reflect the direct feedback and suggestions from parents and inform and shift agency culture. 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.

It is always better for children 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 while actively seeking and supporting reunification with their families. A robust relationship between a child'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 staff and parent partners are supportive and help facilitate early and ongoing communication.

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance.
Contact ctfalliance.org

The quotes below highlight why birth and foster parent relationships matter:

"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? All we want to do is provide for our children."

—KIMBERLY MAYS, BIRTH PARENT (WASHINGTON)

"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)

"I have deep appreciation for the challenges faced by most birth parents when their children are placed in foster care in my home. My goal is to help them reunite with their children ... and stay in touch and remain a support to the whole family."

—ROBYN ROBBINS, FOSTER PARENT (CALIFORNIA)



Youth Connections Scale

A tool for practitioners, supervisors,
& evaluators of child welfare practice

- Measure permanent, supportive connections for youth in foster care
- Guide case planning around strengthening youth connections
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Making Co-Parenting a Standard Practice in Foster Care

Michele Favale, LMFT

It is no surprise that having a child placed in foster care has a great impact on the entire family. Traditionally, foster care agencies have put a primary emphasis on supporting the child in their new home environment while work with parents and families is often separate and even secondary. Our approach at Rising Ground, a human services provider in New York City, is different. We focus on the entire family.

When a child is in foster care, the most frequent and most desirable goal is to return to the family. We need to work with the entire family to achieve that goal. Our Co-Parenting Approach to foster care is focused on creating a positive relationship between parents and foster parents. In 2020, we began to pilot our Co-Parenting Approach with the support of the Relich Horwitz Foundation. This approach was developed by myself, Michele Favale, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, after speaking with our veteran foster parents, parents, and children in care.

Together, we discussed what each party wanted to see in foster care and what helped them succeed in their own process. Countless times during this period, I heard that the

Co-Parenting does not come naturally in foster care. It can take time to develop this relationship. Our foster parents play such an important role in supporting the parents and work hard to be their ally. By building and supporting this relationship, parents stay more involved in their child's life while they are living outside the home.

We want the bond between children and their parents to remain strong despite the disruptions of foster care involvement. Parents often miss first words, steps, or other milestone moments in their child's life. However, when this positive relationship exists, parents don't fear they will miss out on these moments because the foster parent is in regular and positive communication. They can text, video chat, or send photos. Together, they can attend events that are important to the child. This child who once would miss their parents now has two families working to support them.

To begin the collaboration process, families are matched with a Co-Parenting Coach. The coach's responsibility is to establish the relationship between parents and foster parents. They work with both families upon intake to

confidence in their abilities to support their children. We work through barriers from a place of empathy and understanding. When challenges arise, we come together as a team to understand the situation and explore creative solutions.

In addition to the direct work, our foster parents, parents, and staff attend a two-hour training on the importance of this approach. These trainings are offered to each group separately and give them the opportunity to explore new and creative ways to develop this relationship. Each of these trainings are unique. We take an in-depth look at our roles and responsibilities to this work. Foster parents begin to understand that they play a greater role in supporting families in care. They learn ways to lead with empathy, include the parents in more ways, and how to model positive parenting skills. During the parent training, parents can confront their initial feelings toward foster parents and work through these feelings to begin developing a relationship with the foster parents. We are creating an environment that allows them to learn from other parents, something all parents can benefit from.

Piloting this approach during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was an unforeseen challenge. Parents were restricted to only visiting their children via video platforms. However, a silver lining emerged as parents and foster parents were able to spend more time communicating and getting to know one another. Young children have much shorter attention spans for video calls, so it was our foster parents who were sharing updates and information about the child's daily activities with the parents. These video calls gave the adults the opportunity to get to know each other.

We want this to be a standard practice across all foster care agencies. Co-Parenting has decreased the stress placed on parents and children in care and led to faster family reunifications. We have seen and heard wonderful examples of how this approach has had such a positive impact on our children and families. One foster parent was so proud of the child's mother for getting her own apartment that she took her shopping for curtains and helped her decorate. Another mother and foster mother together planned and hosted a fifth birthday party for a little girl who was afraid she would have to choose who to celebrate her birthday with. It is examples like these that keep us committed to this work on even the most challenging days.

Michele Favale, LMFT, is the co-parenting facilitator of Family Foster Care at Rising Ground. Contact mfavale01@manhattan.edu

This child who once would miss their parents now has two families working to support them.

relationship the parent and child had with the foster parent was among the top reasons reunification was possible. By focusing on this unique relationship, incorporating multiple family members, and exploring family dynamics, we were able to develop a comprehensive approach.

ensure the lines of communication are open. Through phone calls and face-to-face meetings, the families get to know one another and communicate about the care and well-being of the child. Through these meetings with the foster parent and coach, parents are often strengthening their parenting skills and gaining



Parent Partners Provide Mentoring and Support in Rural Iowa

Allee Mead, This article was originally published by the Rural Monitor, a publication of the Rural Health Information Hub

Melony Gravenish is Operations Coordinator for an Iowa program called Parent Partners, which pairs families who have had a child or children removed from the home with mentors with shared experience who have successfully navigated the state’s Department of Human Services (DHS) system. Gravenish’s journey with Parent Partners began after overcoming

Gravenish then began an outpatient treatment program, met with a therapist, and joined a group called Moms Off Meth, a support group of women going through the child welfare system. She has been sober since March 2006. Gravenish’s daughter was able to live with her again, around the same time Parent Partners got started.

help their clients access community resources like substance use treatment. Some qualifications to be a mentor include having been reunited with their child or children for at least a year (or having had a year to resolve issues related to situations in which the children were not reunited), having been substance-free for at least one year (if substance use was an issue), and completing all mandated trainings.

“Who better to support somebody else than a parent who has been there themselves?” **Sara Persons**, State Coordinator, asked.

Who better to support somebody else than a parent who has been there themselves?

Parent Partners began when Iowa’s DHS leaders attended a conference and learned about peer-to-peer mentoring. In 2007, DHS set up three pilot sites, and the program expanded to 68 counties in 2012. Persons’s organization, Children & Families of Iowa, was awarded a contract to manage a statewide rollout of the program, which was completed in 2015. Parent Partners is now available in all 99 counties, 88 of which are rural.

Persons said it’s important to get backing before implementing a program like Parent Partners: “They had DHS leadership buy-in. They had vocal buy-in from agencies from across the state of Iowa... The state of Iowa identified that this was a much-needed support for parents.”

Parent Partners are mentors as well as coaches, liaisons, and advocates. They work with community-based organizations, social workers, and legal and other professionals to connect their clients with needed supports and services.

her own struggles with substance use.

In 2005, she and her now-husband had been arrested for the presence of a meth lab in their small-town home. Her daughter, who was four at the time, was removed from the home and lived with Gravenish’s mother. During a visit to the sheriff’s office, drugs were detected in Gravenish’s system and her juvenile court judge ordered her to complete inpatient treatment. “And I was only there for about 40 hours when they came and told me I wasn’t ‘bad’ enough to be there,” Gravenish said. “If I wanted to stay, I would have had to pay whatever the daily amount was. And I couldn’t do that.”

From Three Pilot Sites to a Statewide Program

Parent Partners is a statewide program that supports parents involved in child welfare cases where a child or children have been removed from the home. The program is voluntary; parents who decline to participate in Parent Partners receive traditional child welfare services. The Parent Partners program pairs participating parents with mentors who have shared experience.

These mentors are parents who successfully navigated their own child welfare cases, and they

Parent Partners

MELONY GRAVENISH



It took a long time for me to be able to realize that people aren’t just mean. They don’t know. They just don’t know what it’s like to be an addict. They don’t know what people in recovery are like or that people do recover.

SARA PERSONS



Who better to support somebody else than a parent who has been there themselves?

DEANNA TIPTON



I support my clients through the DHS process, help them find resources, help them learn to advocate for themselves — just help them to find a better way of life.

Services for Clients and the Larger Community

Parent Partners are mentors as well as coaches, liaisons, and advocates. They work with community-based organizations, social workers, and legal and other professionals to connect their clients with needed supports and services. At the beginning of a family's case, mentors visit their clients an average of four times each month.

Deanna Tipton described her role as a lead Parent Partner: "I support my clients through the DHS process, help them find resources, help them learn to advocate for themselves — just help them to find a better way of life." Some parts of her work, she said, include helping clients with transportation and helping some get their driver's license back.

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Gravenish said that parents as well as their mentors face challenges with "transportation, childcare, employment, housing — everything you can think of." She added, "Partnerships with agencies, with the community — That's how in a rural area you get around these barriers and the challenges that you have." In addition, the program has funds available, up to \$400 per family, for needs like vehicle repairs or clothing for job interviews. From fiscal years 2016 to 2019, 302 individuals were assisted with these funds.

Despite these challenges, Persons said the mentors do great work: "Those Parent Partners are amazing in knowing the services and supports in and around those rural areas. They are constantly letting the parent know about things that are available in those areas and helping them to brainstorm how to get there and overcome some of those obstacles. They're a great bridge in those gaps of services."

Gravenish said of her time mentoring families, "I told everybody, 'I'm here to walk beside you and help you with whatever it is you need to be successful. If that's applying for jobs, if that's finding housing, if that's going to school, whatever it may be, I'm here to help you. Because I've been through this. I know that in order to get where I'm at now, I had to make major changes in my life.'" These major changes often include therapy and substance use treatment as well as education.

This education component extends to community education as well, since there is a stigma around parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Gravenish herself remembers judging mothers whose children had been removed from the home until "I was one of those moms."

It took a long time for me to be able to realize that people aren't just mean. They don't know. They just don't know what it's like to

be an addict. They don't know what people in recovery are like or that people do recover.

Gravenish has shared her story at conferences and community events to change people's perceptions of families who have been involved with child welfare. "It took a long time for me to be able to realize that people aren't just mean. They don't know," she said. "They just don't know what it's like to be an addict. They don't know what people in recovery are like or that people do recover."

Tipton echoed Gravenish's thoughts on stigma from the community: "When you have people that are out in a little town where there's only 200 people, there's not a lot of support there. A lot of people know who you are. They look at their past and they don't wanna be involved with them."

Support and Opportunities for Mentors

Mentors also have access to clinical support, provided by a master's-level clinician. Persons said, "The group goes and meets with the clinician once a month to...see how things are going. As we know, they're put back in very similar situations in which their case may have been. So we want to continue to have those conversations and make sure that they are healthy and they have the support that they need as well." Mentors can also meet with the clinician individually.

Just as the program offers clinical support to the mentors, Gravenish looks out for her coordinators to make sure they're accessing needed resources and not experiencing burnout.

She said one concern early on in developing the program was what to do if mentors relapsed:

Tipton said the health benefits of being in recovery go beyond stopping drug use: "Our brains go through a change. The fog starts to lift. We start living healthier. We start actually eating...In general, our minds and our bodies just get stronger. They get better."

"Everybody's like, 'Oh my God, what if they relapse?' Well, what if they do? Then what are we going to do? We are gonna support them. They're not bad people and it's gonna happen. It just is. So we have processes and procedures around all that [to get them help]."

The program also serves as a professional opportunity for the mentors. Parent Partners mentors who have been in the program for some time and have shown leadership potential may be hired for positions like service area coordinators. Persons said half her staff are former Parent Partners.

For example, years ago Gravenish's DHS worker recommended that she get involved with the new program as it was just starting to develop, so Gravenish completed the Building

Benefits of Mentorship in Child Welfare Cases

Challenges in Providing Substance Use Disorder Treatment to Child Welfare Clients in Rural Communities, a literature review released in January 2020 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), lists peer mentorship as a potential strategy to overcome the barriers to helping child welfare clients access treatment in rural areas. The literature review says that peer mentors and groups like Narcotics Anonymous provide crucial support to parents in recovery. In addition, the peer mentors can be a source of inspiration for parents as well as child welfare workers, as examples of people who have successfully navigated their own journeys of recovery and reunification with their children.

a Better Future (BABF) training. Her area of northwest Iowa received a regional partnership grant for families involved with meth, and Gravenish was hired as a Parent Partner mentor under that grant.

She was a mentor for a year and a half before a leadership position opened up. "We needed a coordinator for our area and I found out that I'm not a very good follower," she joked. Gravenish became a coordinator supervising

four or five counties. As the program grew, she became the coordinator overseeing 11 or 12 counties. When the program became available statewide in 2015, she became the service area coordinator overseeing 30 counties in western Iowa. In 2019, under a new state contract, she started her current position as the statewide operations coordinator.

Gravenish believes that there are now fourth-generation Parent Partner mentors in northwest Iowa: "The original Parent Partners [when the program began in 2007] — the parents that they mentored become Parent Partners and then they mentor parents, they become Parent Partners, and then they mentor and become Parent Partners...so that is a very good indication of how good the program is."

For example, Tipton started her Parent Partners journey as a client. After living with substance use for many years, she came to rural Ottumwa to start a treatment program and was assigned a Parent Partner. When she was in recovery and her children were able to live with her again, she wanted to become a mentor: “It turns out I’m really good at it because of my experiences. It’s our experiences that give us the education for this kind of thing.” Tipton has been clean for four years.

Some mentors work on their college degrees while working in the program. “It’s amazing to see how many Parent Partners have gotten their degree, whether it’s a two-year or their master’s,” Persons said. “We have one partner that is going on to get her doctorate.”

Parent Partners also has data showing improvement in the families’ lives. A 2019 Children and Youth Services Review article studied the program’s outcomes between 2011 and 2014 and found that clients’ children were more likely to return home than non-participants’ children (62.4% of the time compared to 55.8%) and that clients were less likely to have another child removal within a year of the child returning home (removed from the home 13.4% of the time compared to 21.8% of the time).

A 2019 annual report shows that Children & Families of Iowa (CFI) received 1,554 referrals that fiscal year and provided mentoring support to 1,963 parents. CFI asked families upon exiting services to complete a family self-

disengaged with this support, and two others either relapsed or became re-involved with DHS. The other 10 had more positive experiences, either still engaging with the additional support or successfully closing out this support.

More recently, program coordinators are looking into ways to support families in order to prevent cases where children are removed from the home. This pilot, taking place in the counties of Linn and rural Appanoose and Wapello, enrolled 31 individuals from October 2018 to June 2019. During this time, there were only three referrals that led to a child being removed from the home.

Children & Families of Iowa is working with the University of Nebraska in Lincoln to collect data and evaluate the program and to study prevention efforts. In addition, Parent Partners received a promising rating from the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. A July 2020 HHS brief highlights Parent Partners and eight other programs addressing substance use among families involved with child welfare.

The program hosts meetings open to the community for people to discuss gaps in services and families’ needs, especially in rural communities. Persons, who lives in a rural area, said a strength in rural communities is their ability to “wrap around that family or help come up with problem-solving strategies to fill gaps in services and supports. In rural areas, they’re all about community.”

Persons said that the Parent Partners program has received inquiries from organizations in Colorado, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin on how to replicate a similar program in their state. She said it’s important to have “the parent voice at the table. And not just to check a box to have a parent at the table, but to really uplift their voice and hear what it is that needs some extra attention in the child welfare arena to better serve families and keep families together.”

[Persons] said it’s important to have “the parent voice at the table. And not just to check a box to have a parent at the table, but to really uplift their voice and hear what it is that needs some extra attention in the child welfare arena to better serve families and keep families together.”

Success Stories and Plans for the Future

Tipton remembers one client who was about to lose custody of her children: “Something inside of her just kind of broke and she just dove face-first into recovery.” She was able to get an extension on her case to keep making changes, then her children were able to come home and her DHS case has since been closed.

Another client lost custody of her child but was still able two years later to get back into recovery and improve her relationship with her children. Tipton said that may not sound like a success story, but this client has been clean for two years: “Usually when people lose their kids, they don’t have any reason to move on. They just go back into addiction and that’s it.”

Tipton said the health benefits of being in recovery go beyond stopping drug use: “Our brains go through a change. The fog starts to lift. We start living healthier. We start actually eating...In general, our minds and our bodies just get stronger. They get better.”

Of course, the children benefit too when the parents are healthier. For example, Tipton said that when parents are using substances, “Our kids aren’t getting to the doctors, they’re not getting to the dentist, they’re missing all that stuff. They’re missing their vaccinations; they’re missing whatever it is that they’re supposed to be getting along the way.”

“If you knew me six, seven years ago,” Tipton said, “you would not wanna associate with me at all. But now I’m a stable person. I pay my bills. I have my own place. I have my own vehicle. I have a really good job. My kids are happy and healthy. So we can change. Things do get better. As long as we get out of addiction, we can start to build better lives.”

assessment. In analyzing 427 self-assessments, the organization found that 66.3% of parents’ scores increased by at least one point compared to the self-assessments completed upon program entry. Parents indicated the most improvement on statements like “I feel comfortable when talking with my DHS worker or other service providers” and “I am able to effectively speak up for myself and family to DHS and other service providers.”

The annual report also states that there are 155 parents who are mentoring or training to become mentors, with 105 of them fully trained.

In 2018, Parent Partners started a pilot program to provide six months of support after a parent’s child welfare case closes. From October 2018 to June 2019, 14 individuals received this support. One individual accepted the additional support for two months, another



Approaching Parenting of Children in Foster Care as a “We” Job: Supporting Birth Families for Success

Victoria Camper & Brandy Hudson

At the heart of the experience of every child in foster care are relationships – or lack thereof – among the adults in the child’s life. One relationship that’s especially important to the child’s well-being is that between birth parents and resource parents, as successful co-parenting reduces a child’s stress and trauma and increases their comfort and security.

The Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) works with states and agencies across the nation to support child welfare systems in adopting and improving child-centered policies and practices, including facilitating and supporting healthy co-parenting relationships between

opportunity for the adults in the child’s life to connect over the child’s well-being and develop a communication agreement.

- **Redesigning visitation as family time:** Ensuring periods when the birth parent spends time with their child creates opportunities for parents to strengthen parent relationships and engage in normal family activities together.
- **Offering peer supports:** Practices that empower parents who have had similar experiences offers support and guidance to birth parents.

Promoting Shared Parenting

Birth parents want to feel they are contributing to their child’s care and sharing parenting duties. Sometimes, birth parents will offer the resource parents clothing or a haircut for their child. Resource parents may need coaching from the agency to honor these contributions. The birth parent is expressing that they want to be part of the parenting of their child and they want their wishes and what’s culturally important to them to be respected. This idea also extends to agencies identifying natural opportunities for shared parenting in the most important parts of their child’s life including medical appointments, school activities, and extracurricular activities.

QPI has broadly implemented several practices to support early and ongoing communication and prepare for a healthy relationship.

birth and resource parents. While child welfare primarily focuses on resource parent hesitations about partnership with birth parents, there are many reasons why birth parents also initially may feel reluctant about a relationship with their child’s resource parents. However, when the birth-resource parent partnership is presented as child-centered, parents and agencies support it as such and birth parents are often more open to the idea. This article focuses on practice areas that QPI has learned are important to support birth parents in co-parenting relationships.

Increasing Agency Preparation and Support for Birth Parents

The point at which birth parents prepare to meet their child’s resource parents is often just after removal. The birth parent has little to no information about the system, what’s happening to their child, or the role and expectations of resource parents. These factors may lead the birth parent to initially feel uneasy about participation in relationships.

QPI has broadly implemented several practices to support early and ongoing communication and prepare for a healthy relationship.

- **QPI comfort calls:** A phone call between the birth and resource parent in the hours after the child is placed with a foster home allows the birth parent, as the expert on their child, to share the information resource parents need to know to provide the child with the best care possible.
- **Ice breakers:** A meeting between a birth and resource parent, coordinated and facilitated by a caseworker, provides an

Increasing Transparency and Communication

Honesty and trust form the foundation of the relationship between birth and resource parents.

One common challenge to building trust relates to lack of clarity and transparency about the resource parent’s duties and communication with the system. Resource parents are mandated reporters and are often responsible for answering questions about the birth parents’ interactions with children. Resource parents may be unclear about when and what they must communicate about the birth parent to the caseworker or court. When they do need to share information, resource parents should receive guidance so that they can share information in a way that respects the relationship with the birth parent. For example, resource parents can tell birth parents what they’re going to say in advance in order to promote an open and honest relationship.

Supporting Parents Through Conflict

Support must be available to help parents navigate potential conflict through a child-focused approach. As an example, a common, potentially contentious scenario is when a child is invited to go on vacation or to a special event with their resource family. If this is an opportunity the child hasn’t ever had with their birth family, this can be difficult for a birth parent, and, initially, the birth parent may not want their child to attend. Ensuring that agencies provide support to identify what concerns the birth parent while also centering the child’s needs is key. The support can help the birth parents process and refocus on the needs of the child.

Providing Information for Birth Parents on Attachment and Child Development

Children’s attachment to their resource parent may create tension in the co-parenting relationship. During family/visitation time it can be difficult for the birth parent to see their child very attached to the resource parent, and in response, the birth parent may exclude the resource parent from the visit. When a baby or toddler has a healthy attachment to the resource parent but the resource parent is not present, successful visits are challenging because the toddler is upset. It’s important that birth parents are provided information about the benefits of this attachment. If the resource parent is there, the child is less stressed, which allows a quality visit for the baby and the birth parent. In fact, QPI supports the visitation model Fostering Relationships (FR) that changes visitation practice using these principles.

Another sensitive point for many birth parents is watching their child seek comfort from the resource parent first. As painful as this can be, if birth parents have information on child development, they can understand that their child’s ability to have a healthy attachment with the person responsible for their daily care is something that should bring pride. With education, they can understand that attachment can transfer back to the parent when their child comes home.

Similarly, developmental education can help birth parents prepare for the potentially emotional moment they may hear their child call the resource parent “Mommy” or “Daddy.” With preparation, they can understand from the child’s perspective why this is happening. For example, when toddlers start calling a resource parent “Mom,” likely it is not because

Fostering Family Connections – Three Small Changes with Big Impacts for Families

Katie Biron, BS, BSN

The benefits to children and youth placed in out-of-home care through the child welfare system when parents and caregivers can work together to support children are numerous – children are able to maintain connections to the important people in their lives, they do not feel a sense of divided loyalties by having to choose between their parents and

caregivers, and transitions can be thoughtfully planned to reduce the trauma experienced by the child. However, it is important to remember that these are unique human connections; and guidance and resources are needed in order for parents and caregivers to successfully build and maintain these complex relationships. Some child welfare jurisdictions

have specialized programs to support parent and caregiver relationships, but, in the majority of jurisdictions, support is provided by the assigned social or case worker. This article provides social workers and other child welfare stakeholders with practical steps they can implement in their daily practice to support these relationships.

Step 1

Look at parents as individuals and avoid making generalized assumptions that parents and caregivers should never have a connection.

One significant barrier to building relationships is the fear that one is doing something wrong by communicating directly with the parent/caregiver. I cannot tell you how many times, when working with a parent or caregiver making those initial steps to reach out, I am asked, “Is this ok? Am I doing something wrong by sending this note, giving my phone number, sending some extra snacks to a family time visit for not only the child, but also the parent?” Parents are concerned that having contact with the caregiver will be seen as negatively impacting their case. Caregivers are concerned that they are violating a policy or regulation by communicating with a child’s parents. Both are looking to you, and other child welfare stakeholders, for permission to connect with one another on a very basic level: They care about the child, and they want to reduce the negative impact of an incredibly traumatic event for the child, —separation from a parent or parents. Talk about the benefits of partnership to the child, not just once, but frequently when you interact with the parent or caregiver. Notice and call out the little things such as, a caregiver who texts the parent pictures of the child a few times a week and a parent who shares with the caregiver a bit about their child’s routines and likes/dislikes in a visit journal.

Be aware of any policies or rules that may exist in your jurisdiction that negatively impact parent and caregiver relationships. If there is a broad policy against contact, examine the rationale behind the policy. Is it a holdover from the previous way of thinking, when relationships between parents and caregivers were discouraged (for example having a caregiver drop off the child through an office back door while the parent is told to enter through the front door in an attempt to ensure there is absolutely no contact between the two)? Are we painting all parents in the same light, and maintaining these policies out of fear? Are there situations where contact between parents and caregivers should not occur? Absolutely. However, having a broad policy prohibiting or discouraging relationships between all parents and caregivers fails to recognize the individuality of each family and of each situation. Instead of assuming that all parents are dangerous and pose a risk to the caregiver, make a concerted effort to look at each person individually, and use that assessment to identify those situations in which parents and caregivers should not have contact. If there is no identified safety risk or threat, encourage parents and caregivers to work together to support the child.

Step 2

Help parents and caregivers come to the relationship with realistic expectations.

I recently heard someone describe the relationship as “brutiful,” and I was immediately struck at the accuracy of that term to describe this extraordinarily unique relationship. Relationships between parents and caregivers can absolutely be beautiful, but they can also be brutal. If we try to brush aside this fact, or only focus on the stories with picture-perfect outcomes, we are setting up the relationship, and those in it, for failure. We must acknowledge the unique circumstances that are bringing these people together – one person is caring for a child (or children) that are no longer in the custody of their parent/s (whether through forcible separation or voluntary relinquishment). That circumstance is inherently complicated and unlike any other human relationship.

Being honest with parents and caregivers at the onset that the relationship will have times when things are going well and, there will also be bumps in the road, sets everyone up with realistic expectations. If parents and caregivers go into the relationship expecting that perfect outcome, then any divide or disagreement can quickly become insurmountable, which can result in parents and caregivers abandoning their efforts to build a relationship. On the contrary, when parents and caregivers are told to expect the relationship to be “brutiful” and are given resources and support that they can seek when a disagreement occurs, maintaining successful, lasting relationships becomes more likely.

Step 3

Remember that the parent and caregiver relationship is more like a marathon than a sprint.

It takes time to build trust, particularly given the complexities of these relationships. Without this knowledge, one of two things is likely to occur. The first is an enthusiastic, well-meaning caregiver that jumps in with both feet, only to have their efforts either be rejected by the parent or to feel like the relationship has no boundaries, quickly spiraling out of control (and out of their comfort zone). The second is a hesitant caregiver, who agrees to take a reluctant step forward, only to have a similar outcome – either rejection or too much too fast. Either situation typically ends with the caregiver withdrawing completely from the relationship, and often, unwilling to have any further contact or engagement with the parent. Instead, let caregivers and parents know that it is okay to start small, and to give the relationship time and space to develop. Parents involved in the child welfare system often go through a process of transformation, and starting small allows the relationship to grow as the parents gain the skills and knowledge they need to rectify the issues that brought the family to the attention of the system. Educate caregivers that making this transformation will require a substantial amount of effort and energy from the parent, and that mistakes will be made. Similar to setting expectations, caregivers must have a realistic picture of the highs and lows associated with recovery from substance use disorder, domestic violence, or other factors that might influence working together. This knowledge will allow caregivers to have compassion and understanding for parents when struggles arise. At times, boundaries that had been loosened may need to be temporarily tightened back up depending on the situation, but caregivers who understand and expect peaks and valleys are more likely to continue the relationship, instead of discarding the relationship completely at the first sign of trouble.

Supporting Collaborative Partnerships Amongst Caregivers

Judith Woods, PhD, LP, LPCC, IMH-E® (IV) and Carrie Meiners, MS

Improving experiences of children and families involved in the child welfare system is a shared responsibility of professionals working within all parts of the system. A multidisciplinary team approach, which brings varied perspectives and experiences into each case, should be used to support children and families. This multidisciplinary team includes the child protection staff, Guardian ad Litem, mental health professionals, school personnel, foster families, and birth families. The team can also include informal

children who enter foster care is to maintain their connections to family, community, culture, and traditions. To become familiar with a child's individualized background, consultation and connection with their birth family is critical. Professionals can assist in the gathering and sharing of child specific information; however, connecting foster families and birth families directly can vastly increase the power and productivity of this responsibility.

Ultimately, the team should utilize creativity and flexibility to ensure some type of contact occurs regularly to support children placed in foster care.

supports such as family members, friends, community members, mentors, spiritual connections, and other people important to the structure and functioning of a family unit. Although each team member has an important role, this article will focus on the importance of communication and connections between foster families and birth families.

To support children placed out of their home, partnership between the birth family and foster family should be promoted whenever possible. Building connections between households can increase information sharing, decrease trauma associated with out of home placements, encourage successful reunification, and support connection post-reunification. A central strategy for building a collaborative partnership begins with understanding multiple perspectives, often steeped in activating emotions. Being curious about the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of other people can be helpful in building relationships. Offering others an opportunity for benevolent explanations, or positive well-meaning motivations, allows for kindness and grace to begin to build the foundations of these relationships.

Birth families have experienced trauma—minimally in the separation from one another—and more likely in a chronic and complex way. Emotions often are high and can include anger, fear, grief, and sadness, sometimes all at once. In most cases, a foster placement is not something a parent plans or hopes to have happen to their children and they may have complicated thoughts and feelings about it. Often birth families have fears of being judged or looked-down-upon in this situation. Parts of the system can feel adversarial, so the idea of working collaboratively can feel difficult or stressful.

Foster families decide to enter foster care for many different reasons, though a commonality is a desire to help. One vital way to help

Supporting foster families and birth families requires time. Each family unit benefits from an explanation of each other's roles, perspectives, responsibilities, and limitations during an out-of-home placement experience. Educating foster families and birth families on the importance of direct communication and connection can help increase their understanding and willingness to maintain contact. When relationships form between foster families and birth families, this can result in an increase to each family's support system.

There may be occasions when foster caregivers and/or birth families are not comfortable with direct contact. When necessary, to ensure the safety of children and families involved with foster care placements, the multidisciplinary team may develop alternative methods of maintaining contact. Ultimately, the team should utilize creativity and flexibility to ensure some type of contact occurs regularly to support children placed in foster care. This may be through facilitated or supervised contact, emails, texts, phone calls, video calls, or other structured settings.

Consideration should always be made for adult discussions—and adult disagreements—to happen in private. It is important that the children not be placed in a position to hold adult issues. Age-appropriate honesty is different from over-exposure to discussions that may be very stressful for children. Conversations between adults can be intense and get heated. It is important to remember and utilize the professional team for their identified roles. For example, it is the social worker's role to discuss the case plan with the family. This is not a duty intended nor expected of a foster caregiver. Focus should remain on maintaining connections and consistency, when possible, for children.

With active efforts to increase communication and connections between birth

Comfort Call

When safe and appropriate, and at the earliest possible opportunity, a comfort call should be placed between the foster caregiver(s) and the birth parent(s) to establish an initial connection. All parties involved should be encouraged to utilize patience and respect as they work to gain an understanding of each other. At the discretion and comfort level of foster caregivers, there are additional opportunities for promoting connections between the family units. These may include the foster caregivers coordinating ongoing contact (i.e. phone calls, visits), inviting birth family members into their home or to community events, informing birth family members of school or medical appointments and attending meetings together, or formally mentoring birth family members. With ingenuity, opportunities for connections between foster families and birth families can be limitless.



families and foster families, the ideal result is an improved experience with the out-of-home placement process and foster care system for children, caregivers, and team members. The primary shared goal of all multidisciplinary team members and caregivers is to decrease trauma that children experience. Ultimately, any decrease in trauma to children involved in the system should be considered a victory.

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The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: Practical Tips to Create Lasting Relationships

Children's Trust Fund Alliance

More and more birth parents, foster parents, and kinship caregivers across the country are using their collective voices to transform systems, culture, policies, and practices to improve outcomes for children and families. They are members of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP), a national network committed to building lasting relationships between birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers to support families and to help child welfare systems improve their practices around supporting these relationships. The BFPP is managed through a collaboration between the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs.

The BFPP created two complementary publications to support the development of the birth and foster parent relationships:

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

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: Relationship Building Guide provides strategies to help build respectful and supportive relationships between birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers to meet the needs of the children in care and strengthen their families. The guide includes four sections.

- **Section 1** focuses on initial relationship-building strategies including Comfort Calls, a call between the birth parents and the caregiver as soon as the child is placed. It addresses challenges that may impede relationships such as changes in social workers, caregivers, and physical settings.
- **Section 2** provides strategies to strengthen the communication between parents and caregivers. Children feel more secure when the adults in their lives communicate well. Agency workers and staff can help by supporting an environment that allows conversation to occur as much as possible.
- **Section 3** includes strategies for teamwork and support while the birth family navigates the system. With the support of a team ready to show up, listen, and speak up for them, parents are more likely to complete their case plans, rebuild their lives, and reunify with their children.

- **Section 4** discusses how the child welfare system provides strategies that build connections and meaningful relationships that can last a lifetime. With the support of social workers, service providers, and community members, parents and foster parents are able to maintain the relationships they have built. When faced with challenges, parents may continue to reach out especially if they are connected to an ongoing resource.

Below is one example of a birth and foster parent partnership that worked.

Jody Rodgers, a birth parent, and Robyn Robbins, a foster parent, are from California and met at a BFPP meeting. Jody works as a birth parent mentor, helping parents navigate the child welfare system, and Robyn works as a mentor for resource parents. At the event, Jody and Robyn learned more about building partnerships between birth and foster parents/

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

kinship caregivers as a strategy to help birth families work toward reunification. They were inspired and ready to change the mindset and practice in their own community. They decided to work together to mentor and support parents who recently had their children removed. The plan was simple, as Jody stated: "Let's see what happens if we just wrap a family with support."

Soon, Robyn was called by the agency to care for a newborn foster infant and Jody contacted the birth mother. They began using the steps described in the relationship building guide. The baby had many medical appointments, some more than an hour away. They created a team for the mother and her baby. With the support of Jody and the social worker, the mother and Robyn arranged to drive together to appointments, which allowed them to talk with each other and develop a bond.

Jody, Robyn, the birth mother, the social worker, medical providers, support group friends, service providers, and the judicial team all collaborated. This birth parent was able to share her needs and concerns with people who were ready to listen and help. Jody and Robyn supported this mother in team meetings, in court, and at her treatment center.



This mother still reaches out to Jody and Robyn and others she met during her time working with the system. Her son has always been surrounded by a caring and friendly group of adults and has not had the extra trauma that often happens when children are moved between families. At four years old he is thriving and exemplifies Jody's statement that,

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

The social worker called it one of her easiest cases because Jody, Robyn, and the mother did all the work. Today they continue to advocate for families involved in the child welfare system.

*The Children's Trust Fund Alliance.
Contact ctfalliance.org*



The Alliance is the national membership organization for state children's trust and prevention funds. Together they have created a strong national network that works to strengthen families, promote child well-being, build healthy communities and effective systems to prevent child abuse and neglect.

A Call to Reimagine: The Role of Resource Parents in Family Recovery and Reunification

E. Russ Bermejo, MSW, and Yvette Bond

As the frontline intervention for children removed from their homes due to child maltreatment and parental substance use, resource parents have a critical role in supporting the goals of family recovery and family reunification and helping this nation achieve a reimagined child welfare system.

Resource parents arguably have the most challenging job in the child welfare system. Not only are they frontline responders for the 407,000 children currently living in out-of-home placements (Children's Bureau, 2020), but they also put in the longest hours and experience every possible emotion in the most stress-filled environments. Resource parents open their hearts and homes, sacrificing themselves and their own families for the care and protection of children.

After more than a decade of declines in the foster care caseload in the United States, cases rose steadily between 2012 and 2017 (Children's Bureau, 2019). Many jurisdictions across the United States report a crisis shortage of foster homes to meet the need of children needing out-of-home placements. Some communities have pointed to the opioid epidemic as pushing more children into foster care. According to federal data, the national average of about 39% of children entering foster care is due to parental substance use (Children's Bureau, 2019). However, most agree this percentage does not reflect the realities in most communities, where they say even more cases are affected by substance use.

These are some of the most challenging families to serve for various reasons. First, the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, which places time limits on parents to comply with reunification requirements or face permanent termination of their parental rights, adds more pressure to families affected by parental substance use. The ASFA timetable may move too quickly to give parents sufficient time to access and complete treatment, achieve recovery, and demonstrate the stability necessary to care for their children.

Unsurprisingly, parental substance use has a significant negative impact on the length of time to reunification and other permanency options (Akin et al., 2015). Also, children who were removed due to parental substance use are less likely to reunify and more likely to have reports of maltreatment (Lloyd & Brook, 2019). We need to do better for these families.

We have promising collaborative practice models, such as Family Drug Courts, Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams (START), and Plans of Safe Care, which leverage the resources of multiple systems including child welfare, the

courts, mental health, substance use treatment, and primary health care; however, we have a long way to go to meet the overall need in this country. So how can we be better?

Today, there is a call for a reimagined child welfare system, one that finally aligns core values with policies, practices, and budgetary priorities. If we are to realize this vision, we will need to improve outcomes for families affected by substance use disorders and build the capacity of resource parents to support family recovery and reunification. Here are three calls to action to do better for these families:

First, we need to change how we think about addiction and the families that struggle with substance use disorders.

These are some of the most challenging families to serve and are arguably the most misunderstood due to the stigma associated with the disease of addiction. These are common perceptions of parents who suffer from addiction:

- Once an addict, always an addict
- They chose to use drugs
- They don't want to change
- They need to get to rock bottom
- They lie and cannot be trusted
- They must love their drug more than their child

Instead of seeing addiction as a moral failure or a matter of choice, science points us to a disease model. According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, addiction is "a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences." Although relapse can be a regular step of the recovery process, like other chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, substance use disorders can be successfully managed with evidence-based treatment and ongoing support.

Addiction is also a disease that affects the entire family. Understanding substance use disorders and their effect on children and families must be a key competency for all members of the child welfare services team. Child welfare agencies can better prepare and support resource parents by ensuring that information about the disease model and relational impact of substance use disorders are part of the recruitment, orientation, and training materials.

Although education is essential, it will take more than a series of training and workshop

Yvette grew up in the foster care system from 9 until she emancipated at the age 18. She is now using her voice to encourage other foster youth. Russ was one of several social workers for Yvette and her family and believes he and the entire system could have done better for them. In 2021, Russ and Yvette reconnected at a foster parent training and have since shared various platforms to share their knowledge and experience. They are learning from each other as they become agents of change.

Yvette on her views of addiction

I have to admit that I still need to shift my thinking about the stigmas surrounding addiction. For me, it is hard to ignore all the poor decisions that led them to their addiction. Can we continue to excuse the behavior of a parent who continuously chooses their addiction over reunification with their child?

Yvette on birth and resource parents working together

Resource parents and birth parents working together toward reunification is the best-case scenario for a foster child. However, it seems unlikely considering the severity of the situation and the emotional attachment resource parents make when they take a foster child into their home.

Resource parents want to see the best outcome for the foster child. They may initially desire reunification and work diligently with the birth parents toward that goal. As time passes and mistakes are made by the birth parents struggling with addiction, resource parents may change their minds about the idea of reunification. Seeing how addiction affects the foster child may cause resource parents to be closed-minded and even judgmental. Think about it; one day the birth parents are working toward their goals, they are motivated, staying sober... then, they relapse and are nowhere to be found. Missed visitations, missed court dates, missed parenting classes. The foster child is upset and crying, not understanding their struggle

sessions to disrupt stigma. On the personal level, it will require serious heart work or self-examination of our values and motivations to determine if they are aligned with our practice. On a systems level, we will need a structured approach toward collaboration, which includes examining how values differ across multiple systems, including dependency court, substance use treatment, and child welfare agencies. Collaborative tools such as the Collaborative Values Inventory (CVI) can serve as a good

need of children and families.

Shared Parenting – Resource parents can also play a critical role in shared parenting. The resource parent can help model quality parenting while honoring the sacred bonds of the child-parent relationship. Children's overall identities lie partly in the way others see their parents, so the resource parents' openness to having a positive relationship with them is essential for healing and healthy development (Schofield & Beek, 2009). When resource

Recruitment is not about signing up to rescue children from their parents, but rather a promise to help heal children and families in their relationships.

stepping-stone for communities that want to strengthen their capacity to work together with other agencies to improve outcomes for families affected by child maltreatment and parental substance use.

Secondly, we need to see relationships as the change agent, especially in family recovery and reunification.

Resource parents play a valuable role in facilitating hope and healing through quality relationships with children and their families. Here are two key opportunities:

Quality Family Time – Resource parents can play a key role in facilitating quality family time, which is critical for all families in the child welfare system, but particularly for parents trying to learn how to parent in recovery and restore their relationships with their children. Children emphasized the importance of maintaining contact with their birth parents and other relatives (Hedin, 2014). Unfortunately, agencies still see family time as a reward for compliance rather than a right and

parents act inclusively and children subsequently see birth parents treated respectfully, this strengthens the relationship with the foster family and promotes continuity and a sense of security for children (Hedin, 2014).

None of this is easy, especially given the chronic nature of addiction and the stressors of recovery and reunification. For kinship caregivers, family history and dynamics pose unique stressors and challenges in their relationships. Resource parents and birth parents, however, should not have to negotiate and navigate these relationships on their own. Instead, they should be seen as a critical part of a system of care. This caring environment would involve employees at agencies understanding the unique characteristics and needs of children in care, including those infants with prenatal substance exposure and older children who have been affected by parental substance use (Redlich Horwitz Foundation, 2017).

A reimagined child welfare system committed to preserving the parent-child relationship of all families should pay particular attention to those affected by substance use

with addiction. The resource parents have to be there to console the crying child and pick up the broken pieces. Considering the emotional impact, it may be hard for the resource parents to work with the birth parents after seeing many inconsistencies in their decision-making. They may ultimately feel that the child is better off with another family.

Birth parents may have a hard time connecting with resource parents. Their life experiences separate them. It isn't easy to understand the internal struggles of addiction. As birth parents work together with resource parents, they may see the stark difference in parenting styles and how their child flourishes under their care. They may become jealous of resource parents and the positive relationship with their kids. It is easy for birth parents to assume that they are being replaced, not helped.

Approaching a resource parent for help may be uncomfortable for the birth parent because they are asking for help with something they should innately know how to do – parent a child. I remember my mom telling me that she wishes she could have given us kids a good life and “had it all together” just like my foster parents. She couldn't help but compare her life of pain and drugs to their successful stable life. She always saw herself as a failure, even when she was off drugs for many years. One of the foster homes I lived in formed a relationship with my mom. They gave her a warm welcome into their home and made themselves available to her for anything she needed. She was unable to take them up on their opportunity to have a close relationship. She felt inadequate and not worthy of it because of the many mistakes she made during the reunification process and her addiction recovery. Even to this day, that foster family will invite her to come over to their house, but my mom will decline because she's embarrassed that they met through the foster care system.

Yvette on supporting the parent-child relationship

I lived in four foster homes and had one failed reunification with my birth mom over the course of nine years. The shortest time



disorders. They should re-examine policies and practices that are not aligned with key values or informed by them.

For example, too many agencies still misuse or over-rely on drug screen results rather than conduct a thorough risk and safety assessment to inform visitation and reunification decisions. A reimagined child welfare system would implement an approach that holds parents accountable and keeps children safe while supporting family reunification and recovery.

first-hand experience warrant their inclusion in multi-disciplinary meetings, collaborative case planning discussions, and court hearings. As the adults who spend the most time with the children, resource parents' input in child and family assessments, case plans, team meetings, court hearings, and other processes is key to ensuring the child's needs are met (Redlich Horwitz Foundation, 2017).

Conducting focus groups and creating foster parent advisory boards are other ways

in a foster home was three months and the longest was three-and-a-half years. The experiences I had in each home were all very different. Two of them were good homes and the other two were bad. The good foster homes were supportive and kind. They allowed me to communicate with my mother, arranged visitation, and encouraged me to have a relationship with her. One of them wanted to adopt me, but that made me feel conflicted. Their family was very nurturing and warm, and I could see them being great parents to me, but I felt a sense of loyalty to my mom and my family. I thought I would let my birth family down if I chose adoption over reunification.

The other two foster homes were borderline abusive, hostile, and not in it for the right reasons. They shot down any form of communication with my mom. They allowed me to have visitation, but they would talk badly about my mom every time I would go, even though she was doing better for herself. It discouraged me and made me feel like I couldn't openly express myself and tell them I wanted to have a relationship with my mom. I saw that she was trying and wanted to be part of my life. But they kept telling me that I would be just like her and that she was no good for me. I believe resource parents can be most effective by supporting the foster child on what type of relationship they want with their parents. Some children desire a relationship with their parents, and some don't because of past abuse and fear. We should listen to the child's wants and needs since they are the victim in this situation.

We must do a better job engaging resource parents as equal partners at the table and provide the support they need to achieve our collective goals. Recovery and reunification are possible, but only if we all work together.

Recruitment is not about signing up to rescue children from their parents, but rather a promise to help heal children and families in their relationships. By making this expectation explicitly clear from the start and through ongoing training and support, we can ensure a shared commitment to achieving shared goals.

Lastly, we need their voice.

If resource parents are a critical resource, they must be included as valued members of the child welfare services team. We must ensure meaningful inclusion and active participation of resource parents so their voices can be heard and used to provide the best quality care and make the most informed decisions. Unfortunately, many resource parents do not feel valued, citing a lack of communication and poor relationships as primary areas of concern (Brown & Calder, 2000; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002). Many feel that they should be more appreciated by professionals and involved in case planning (Lanigan & Burtleson, 2017). Foster parents have also expressed confusion about role definitions and their rights as foster parents (Shklarski, 2019). Resource parents who quit in the first two years of services overwhelmingly report that lack of support was the single biggest reason they decided not to continue fostering (Redlich Horwitz Foundation, 2017).

It will take more than just individual caseworkers debriefing resource parents on how things are progressing. Their frontline care and

jurisdictions have used resource parents' voice to improve policies and procedures and support retention. Developing a customer-service approach with resource parents is another important strategy since their stability and satisfaction directly impact the well-being of the children in their care. Even small but meaningful responses to foster parents' requests make a big difference in their satisfaction and continued commitment (Redlich Horwitz Foundation, 2017). A reimagined child welfare system is one that is ready to listen to resource parents, act on their concerns, and celebrate big and small achievements.

Closing

A reimagined child welfare system will not be realized until we do better for children and families affected by parental substance use disorders. Improving outcomes for these families demands urgent attention and the highest possible standards of practice by the entire child welfare system. We must do a better job engaging resource parents as equal partners at the table and provide the support they need to achieve our collective goals. Recovery and reunification are possible, but only if we all work together.

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Alliance CaRES: Supporting Caregivers by Supporting Family Connections

Shana R. Burres, MEd

While reunification is the known goal of the child welfare system, it is often the foster caregivers who actually hold the daily responsibilities for supporting the relationship between a child and their biological family. Reunification often requires caregivers to partner with biological parents, but there are rarely adequate systems set up to support this work. As the caregiver retention and support program for Washington state, the Alliance CaRES (Caregiver Retention, Education, and Support) program has developed a series of training-based support groups that include practical and skill-building elements on setting expectations for this partnership. Additionally, CaRES layers these groups with other supports such as community connections and mentoring because of our understanding that best practices for supporting caregivers must include helping them navigate the complex and often unexpected challenges of developing an effective co-parenting relationship with the biological family.

Understanding the importance of biological family connections is the foundation for long-term positive biological family support from caregivers. To help set this foundation, CaRES begins emphasizing concurrent planning and reunification from the first moment a potential caregiver interacts with our program. Before they are licensed, caregivers can join a training-based support group that gives them the skills and expectations for their fostering journey. In the CaRES training-based support group, “While You Wait: Fostering Consideration,” caregivers engage in peer-to-peer discussion on topics such as first placement, visitation (called Family Time in Washington), and sibling connections. This group reinforces the emphasis on biological family partnership that is embedded in the Alliance’s Caregiver Core Training, which all caregivers must complete before licensure. If potential caregivers need additional support, they can connect with a CaRES mentor to talk about the licensing and fostering process. Mentors are highly experienced caregivers who are connected to their local foster caregiver networks. They frequently share stories of their own placement and biological family partnership experiences to encourage soon-to-be caregivers to consider how they plan to support a child’s connection with their family. Along with the genuine voices of biological parents and other caregivers included in the Core Training, these early introductions to their role in the reunification process help set positive and realistic expectations for caregivers before they take their first placement.



Once a caregiver is licensed, there are multiple and overlapping ways CaRES supports their work as a bridge between the child and their biological family. The layering of support is critical because, while Family Time is beneficial to the child and the reunification process, it can result in challenges for the caregiver (Nesmith et al., 2015). From simple schedule adjustments to meltdowns after the visit, caregivers are responsible for managing the access to and results of Family Time for the child in their

caregivers to reinforce in their home (Wojciak et al., 2018). This can be as simple as sharing a family recipe or bringing a child to a festival or religious ceremony to integrating patterns such as specific prayers, books, or clothing. Asking the biological family how the caregivers can support their child’s heritage is a significant way to support a stable and ongoing connection with their biological family regardless of the status of Family Time (Sanchirico et al., 2000).

Stable and ongoing connections also are

Asking the biological family how the caregivers can support their child’s heritage is a significant way to support a stable and ongoing connection with their biological family regardless of the status of Family Time.

care. In “Fostering as Part of a Team,” caregivers talk through the ways in which they can partner with the social worker, visitation specialist, and biological family to ensure that the child’s needs are met during the visit and in the time before and after it. In that same group, caregivers are also encouraged to see themselves as team members who have influence over how the child perceives Family Time, including the ways they can support family connection outside of the formal visits via stories, pictures, and affirmations of family qualities.

In another group, “Fostering Across Race, Ethnicity, and Culture,” caregivers discuss how they can encourage a child’s connection not only to the immediate biological family but also to their familial heritage. One of the primary resources the group suggests is talking with the biological family about what aspects of their family culture they would like the

maintained through sibling relationships. Caregivers have a unique opportunity to create a sense of normalcy through caregiver networking. Coordinating informal sibling visits with fellow caregivers allows children to interact outside of Family Time and build memories with their family and community of origin (Wojciak et al., 2018). This approach is one of the strategies discussed in the group “Foster-to-Adopt Journey.” Along with a discussion of the challenges of the adoption process, the group focuses on how adoption through foster care provides an opportunity for the potential adoptive home to embrace their child’s whole history and celebrate their family of origin as part of the new family they will create. Because building sibling bonds requires more than digital supportive training for foster parents, CaRES also offers community groups

Child Welfare Tips for Enhancing Father Engagement

Denise Tift, MA and Neil Tift, MA

Child welfare agencies in the US have typically provided a wide array of services for mothers and children. That has not necessarily been the case for fathers and children. There are explanations for this disparity, some legitimate, others not so much.

As a result, it is beneficial to develop a plan to invite fathers and men in families to participate to be able to maintain contact with their children and establish permanency through reunification. Second, we need to identify and mobilize fathers' assets. Third, we need to dismiss the myth that female child welfare professionals can't work as effectively with fathers as male professionals.

Assessment

We may start with a few questions that assess how father-friendly your agency's programs, policies, and procedures are. Take time to write your answers—as an individual practitioner and as an institution.

- Is provision of services to fathers clearly stated in your agency's mission statement and marketing materials?
- Upon entering the agency, are there positive portrayals of fathers and children in photos, posters, bulletin boards, and display materials?
- Are there materials (magazines, books, videos, etc.) in your waiting rooms, offices, workspace areas, and resource centers that are directed positively toward fathers and men in families?
- Does your staff have speaker phones, Zoom capacity and/or VOIP/Internet conferencing in your offices, so that you can readily communicate with and involve live-away fathers and mothers?
- Is a diaper deck located in the men's restroom?
- Do your intake forms, resources, and materials reflect the diversity of fathers seeking your services?
- Do home visiting resources, agency programs, classes, and related services reflect and respect fathers' availability?
- Are child welfare staff trained to understand men's learning styles, communication preferences, and problem-solving approaches?
- Are all staff sensitive to common barriers that may limit father involvement, especially low and moderate-income fathers?

Mobilizing Father Assets

Most child welfare programs when serving mothers tend to focus upon their strengths and potential for growth: pregnancy and pre-natal needs, parenting skills, housing, children's health, employment, fitness and nutrition,

"I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence—both in my life and the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole that a man leaves when he abandons his responsibilities to his children is one that no government can fill. We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference."

— PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

childcare, and school readiness. Too many child welfare programs when serving fathers default to a focus upon their defects and expected consequences for their failures: child support enforcement, corrections, anger management, child protection, probation and parole, batterer intervention, chemical dependency, and related concerns.

While these clearly do need to be addressed to grow healthy and safe families, many fathers are not in need of such corrective or punitive services.

Once a father seeks your services, begin by focusing upon his strengths, not his shortfalls. The following strategies may help to counter "deficit-first" approaches:

- Offer assistance man-to-man, father-to-father, as possible. This is especially important when providing orientation and training for foster fathers and adoptive fathers. If all the information is presented by female staff, a father's perspectives and his paternal instincts are minimized and ignored.
- Normalize the father's experiences. Help him to see that his situation is common among many dads today.
- Help him to recognize potential problems if he decides to go it alone or to fight the system.
- Clearly indicate that your role is not to report the father to child support enforcement, the department of corrections, immigration, child protection services, the police or probation and parole, unless mandated to do so.

- Present that it takes guts to seek and accept help and courage to deal with the system, especially if he has not benefitted from most elements of it.
- Men tend to view their spouses, partners, and friends as the primary source of help,

rather than receiving direct assistance from professionals and service providers. So, find ways to gather needed information and materials that will address and ameliorate his situation.

- Help him to view problem solving through a win-win approach, rather than defaulting to the zero-sum, win-lose approach.
- When speaking with a father, sit beside him, not face-to-face. Spread out materials on a table in front of both of you to help him gain information and knowledge. Many men are more comfortable working shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face to face, especially with strangers.

When men are receiving information, especially in a group setting, they often prefer to process the information through debate, rather than a dialogue approach. They may want to banter back and forth to mold and shape the information to see how it might apply to their specific situation. Recognize this process as a legitimate way to reach your and his goals.

"My father used to play with my brother and me in the yard. Mother would come out and say, 'You're tearing up the grass.' 'We're not raising grass,' Dad would reply. 'We're raising boys.'"

— HARMON KILLEBREW, BASEBALL HALL OF FAMER

- When talking with a dad, tell him why you are having this conversation. Men often want to know the bottom-line up front. Then he can get a sense of what you want from the discussion. For example, "I would like 20 minutes of your time next visit to talk with you about your plans for your child's educational future." This helps him get an idea of what to expect from the discussion and to perhaps prepare for it.
- In discussion, weave in the idea that help-seeking is a healthy—and practical—

element of masculinity. For example: “Many men who ask for and accept help are better able to support their family in time of need.”

- Share limited information about yourself that is relevant to the presenting situation—divorced, parent of child with special needs, etc.
- Resist the urge to ask him direct questions about feelings or emotions. Do not ask: “How do you feel?” Rather, ask “What was that like for you?”
- Recognize that men often require more time to figure out and make contact with their true emotional state of being.

Father Engagement

A child welfare professionals’ skill and comfort in discussing male issues is more important than the provider’s gender. In other words, with skill, support and effort, female providers can be equally effective when working with fathers.

- Employ approaches that reflect a clear understanding of the psychology of men and that is respectful of their paternal instincts.
- Focus upon the commonality among humans; mothers and fathers often have more things in common than they have that is different.

Men are problem solvers by nature and by socialization. In general, men do not ignore their emotions. Instead, they internally use emotion to identify the problem at hand. Once emotions have served this real and practical purpose, further indulgence in feelings may be a distraction from solving that problem. And the point is that, for most men, this works.

- Direct your feedback to assist him in healthy problem-solving and decision-making.
- Encourage him to generate action-oriented steps and ideas.
- Acknowledge that some fathers may be reluctant to see themselves as a child’s teacher, as they struggle with literacy, may have few financial resources, were not able to finish school, or had traumatic educational experiences.

“My father gave me the greatest gift anyone could give another person. He believed in me.”

— JIM VALVANO, NCAA CHAMPION BASKETBALL COACH

- In its place, recognize and utilize the assets of fathers who see themselves as being a coach for their children, and all that image entails: goal setting, being persistent, teamwork, resilience, sharing responsibilities, motivation,

self-improvement, personal accountability, dealing with conflict and criticism, focusing on the task, healthy communication, mentoring, improving personal performance, developing leadership skills, and learning to lose gracefully.

- Be aware that men’s learning styles and parenting approaches tend to be action-oriented. Fathers are apt to use their bodies more, so consider demonstrating specific skills, and then have the fathers apply them while you encourage and coach them as appropriate. Touching, holding, moving through space, walking, mixing formula, changing diapers, arranging environments, wiping, dressing, baby-proofing, rocking, and other activities give dads pride in accomplishment and make them more likely to retain key skills and knowledge.
- Employ solutions that focus upon logical approaches and specific behavior within his control.
- Avoid (and challenge) language that perpetuates gender stereotyping. For example, fathers parent their children; they do not “babysit” them.
- Remember that men often connect with other men while accomplishing mutual tasks: engaging in hobbies, sports, games, outdoor activities, tinkering, or observing. This allows them to open up more comfortably with others, especially other men. This is an effective and valuable approach—even though it differs from mothers who may prefer to connect through direct conversation and by offering emotional support for the issue at hand.
- Men generally don’t just follow advice or suggestions as presented. Instead, they typically take that information and adapt it to fit their own specific situation. They often need to see the “practicality” of the

information and be able to personalize it.

- Fathers often want to apply concrete steps to identify a difficult problem, then pursue the opportunity to resolve it themselves.

The ABC's of a Father-Friendly Program

Assets of fathers are emphasized, not their deficits

Budget reflects that fathers are a priority

Curricula/educational materials respect range of fathers being served

Diverse staff reflects the population using services

Environment clearly states that dads & men in families are welcome

Father-child bond is emphasized and program activities encourage this

Gender-neutral forms, policies & procedures employed through agency

Hands-on learning experiences are components of father activities

Importance of fathers is promoted, but not at the expense of mothers

Journals, magazines and reading materials reflect the interests of dads

Knowledgeable males recruited to discuss sensitive concerns with fathers

Language is respectful and affirming of all parents and children

Marketing plan invites many faces of fathers, promotes full involvement

Needs of fathers influence the program's growth and development

Outreach staff recruits in locations that all types of fathers visit

Paternal & maternal parenting styles are recognized and equally respected

Quality evaluation tools and procedures that respect fathers are used

Recognize and reduce barriers that limit father involvement

Staff receives periodic best practices training to adequately serve fathers

Targeted services are offered specifically for fathers

Understanding of fathers' physical and mental health concerns is paramount

Values are emphasized that promote gender reconciliation

Women's and men's restrooms each have a diaper deck

Xcellent Advisory Council and active speakers' bureau are in place

Young fathers are offered targeted services

Zealous attitude prevails that we are all in this together

Created by Neil Tift

In the end, you will markedly increase father engagement when you give fathers a safe environment to request help, permission to apply their preferred problem-solving approaches, ample time, positive expectations, respect for paternal instincts, and implied permission to be themselves.

Denise Tift, M.A., is a licensed social worker, marriage and family therapist, family mediator, adoptive mother, foster mom, stepmother, and grandmother. She is a parent educator and has helped establish programs for fathers in three states.

Neil Tift, M.A. has established and managed programs for fathers in Minnesota, Maryland, and Arizona for the past 30 years. He is a family mediator, university instructor, game maker, parent educator, birth father, adoptive father, foster father, and grandfather. He currently serves as Outreach Project Coordinator for the Native American Fatherhood and Families Association.

Denise and Neil are adoptive parents of two daughters with special needs. In addition, they have been foster parents of children and then adults for the past 25 years and provide training for foster parents, adoptive parents, and professionals who work with fathers.

CHERISH™: Nurturing Relationships for Children to Thrive

Julie Fisher, LICSW, IMH-E® and Jennifer Gears, LASW, Interviewed by Stacy Gehringer and Ariana King

CHildren Encouraged by Relationships in Secure Homes, also known as CHERISH, is a Washington-state based program that provides early childhood support services to child welfare system-involved children. The providers qualify as many children involved

CHERISH's services and that they do offer services for parents and caregivers separately in case the parent is not ready to engage with the caregivers yet (if at all).

To continue engaging with families effectively, CHERISH providers listen carefully

these providers report back data*, so that CHERISH can inform funders that their approach makes a difference in the lives of children and families. The multi-level trainings lay the foundation and providers continue to grow over time through doing the work according to CHERISH's model and their own learning. In terms of the learning curve and training providers, there is much to know and much of it is learned "on-the-job", so the ongoing technical support from the Kindering training team is crucial. Anecdotally, many ESIT providers stay in the field doing ESIT work because of their passion for working with this population and providing support in this relationship-based, healing-centered way. CHERISH cannot overemphasize the importance of consistent, quality reflective supervision and consultation for providers to be emotionally available to provide this support and sustain their practice. The CHERISH Program at Kindering saw a unique opportunity to explicitly support child welfare-involved families through the Early Support for Infants and Toddler System (Part-C, federally funded), and has been doing so since 2004. With its expansion training and growing of CHERISH teams statewide, CHERISH sees the opportunity to serve even more children and families—to provide them with individually tailored, trauma-informed and healing-centered supports.

CHERISH cannot overemphasize the importance of consistent, quality reflective supervision and consultation for providers to be emotionally available to provide this support and sustain their practice.

in the child welfare system as possible and then equip their Early Supports for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) or "Early Intervention" providers of all disciplines to support children, in the context of their relationships with their parents and caregivers. CHERISH provides these services through IFSPs (Individual Family Service Plans) with both parents and caregivers, focusing specifically on social and emotional development and the unique needs of children who have experienced the trauma of systems and separation from their parents. Their approach is grounded in evidence-based practices; CHERISH puts individual relationships and specific family experiences at the forefront of their strategy.

A key component of CHERISH's program is engagement of both caregivers and parents predicated on the idea that children do better when they have relationships with families. CHERISH encourages providers to seek regular support through reflective supervision and consultation so they can show up regulated and available for authentic relationships. CHERISH also equips providers with the knowledge they need about cultural awareness, attachment, trauma, brain development, healing, and behaviors they might see. As part of delivering CHERISH services, providers must know how the child welfare system and related systems are supposed to work and how to engage with systems in advocacy of preferred outcomes for children.

Part of that advocacy means addressing the barriers in lack of understanding that the relationship between a child and their parents is important throughout and beyond the life of a child welfare case. CHERISH has engaged in substantial community outreach to help increase this understanding amongst system stakeholders (potential caregivers, parents, social workers, CASAs, etc.). On a more micro level, CHERISH providers take more time to engage and explain services, reach out for a longer duration, and give parents and caregivers more opportunities for engagement. They ensure parents understand that they can access

to the parents and caregivers as they are the experts on their children. The workers support the adults involved with managing their own self-regulation so that they can do the same for the children they love. Providers bring the hope; they help them hold together the complicated pieces of their lives through regular sessions together that are flexible and scheduled around family need and preference.

Of course, this sounds easy on paper, but how does CHERISH train competent, confident providers? The program follows a multi-level training structure for providers*

*Provider Training (three levels)

CHERISH 101 Four virtual half-days of overview/introductory training—after which, participants are "CHERISH-Informed" (offered twice/year)

CHERISH 102 Bi-monthly consultation/mentoring groups for providers who have attended CHERISH 101

CHERISH Certification Six months of concentrated training to become CHERISH clinical providers

CHERISH Family Resource Coordinators (FRCs) Specially trained to support families and the systems advocacy work (each cohort has clinical providers and FRCs)

All levels of training use a relationship-based approach—providing trainees a parallel process in which, as training participants, they experience how families might navigate systems successfully through relationships. CHERISH is working on building a network of providers across Washington State who agree to follow their required components (fidelity) and continue to access CHERISH technical assistance. It is also imperative

*The outcome data CHERISH tracks is:

Parent engagement rates

Number of placement changes
(when moves happen, a big part of our program is promoting best-practice transitions)

Child Outcome Summary Scores

DECA-I/T (Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, Infant/Toddler) entry and exit scores

Demographic data

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Parenting from Behind Bars

Leticia Longoria-Navarro and Mindy Clark

Having an incarcerated parent is one of the top 10 adverse childhood experiences, and one of the toughest places to parent from is prison. Incarcerated parents often have difficulty building and maintaining relationships with their children. Yet we know that maintaining a relationship with an absent parent is an important factor in helping children develop the resilience they need to overcome the trauma of separation.

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 7% of the children entering foster care do so because of parental incarceration, though the number is likely higher. Children whose mothers become incarcerated are more likely to go into foster care than children whose fathers are incarcerated.

easier to manage because it doesn't come with the baggage of a long-term family relationship, or it may be more difficult because it's new and it takes time to develop trust. In either case, teaching parents the skills to navigate that relationship can increase the likelihood that they will be able to maintain their relationship with their children.

Until the early 2000s, there was no parenting curriculum developed specifically to support justice-impacted families, particularly incarcerated parents, and there were few supports for children visiting their incarcerated parents. In 2001, the Oregon Legislature funded a study of the needs of children with incarcerated parents. One key finding was that incarcerated parents wanted to be the best parents they could be from prison, and they

- *PIO* participants had more visits from children and families during their incarceration and were more likely to have an active role parenting their children than the control group.

PIO is a skills-based program that includes specific content to help incarcerated parents learn to build and maintain a healthy relationship with their child's caregiver. *PIO* includes concrete communication, problem-solving, and collaboration skills to enable parents to develop or enhance their relationship with their child's caregiver, whether the caregiver is a relative or a foster parent.

Parents start by learning the fundamentals of good communication through planning for and then role-playing conversations with their child's caregiver. Many parents choose to practice having a conversation with the caregiver about keeping in regular touch with their child through in-person visits, video visits, phone calls and letters. Building a respectful relationship with the caregiver is the first step in creating a child-centered parenting plan. Next, parents explore problem-solving techniques that support collaborating with the caregiver to ensure the best outcomes for the child.

With the foundation of good communication and problem-solving skills, parents go on to explore child development, creating structure and routines in their families, using non-violent discipline techniques, and advocating for their child. Each parent creates a reentry/reunification plan tailored to their child's age, stage of development and temperament, as well as the family situation the child has been in during the parent's incarceration. In cases where reunification is far in the future or is unlikely to occur, parents create parenting plans that take long-term physical separation into account. Integral to all the skills parents learn is collaborating with the child's caregiver.

Helping a child create or maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parent adds a layer of complexity to foster parenting, but it can contribute to long-term benefits for the child. *Parenting Inside Out* has demonstrated that giving parents the skills to work effectively with their child's caregiver benefits the child, the caregiver, and the parent.

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Mindy Clark, MM Parenting Inside Out Special Projects. Contact mclark@thepathfindernetwork.org

Yet we know that maintaining a relationship with an absent parent is an important factor in helping children develop the resilience they need to overcome the trauma of separation.

Parenting from a distance is difficult for any parent, but parenting from prison or jail presents its own set of challenges. Incarcerated parents must work across both the justice system and the child welfare system, which often have conflicting requirements and restrictions. For example, child welfare may require visits for parents to maintain their parental rights, and prisons and jails have visitation restrictions and processes that can be difficult for caregivers to manage.

The relationship between the incarcerated parent and the child's caregiver can help or hinder the incarcerated parent's ability to maintain an active role in parenting their child. The relationship between an incarcerated parent and a foster parent differs from that between biological parents or kinship caregivers such as grandparents. The relationship between the biological parent and the foster parent may be

wanted a program to give them the skills to do that. In 2003, the Oregon Department of Corrections partnered with the Oregon Social Learning Center to create *Parenting Inside Out (PIO)* to meet these families' unique needs.

PIO is based on the best practice Parent Management Training program and was the subject of a randomized control trial (N=359) to examine its effectiveness. It delivered positive outcomes for children and parents. Significant findings of *PIO*'s impact on parent/caregiver and parent/child relationships were:

- During incarceration, the *PIO* group reported significantly more Positive Parent-Child Contact (phone calls, letters, visits) and had a higher score on the Parent Ease of Relationship with Caregiver measurement at the end of their *PIO* class than did the control group.



The Importance of Engaging Fathers in Collaborative Relationships

Michael Huesca, interviewed by Mariel Carlson

Michael Huesca radiates wisdom and confidence in equal measure. As someone who is a leader in multiple organizations in San Diego and nationwide – a local tribe, Paternal Opportunities Programs and Services (POPS), and the Thriving Families, Safer Children Initiative – Michael gives his entire being to efforts to improve child welfare, especially advocating for more engagement of fathers. As someone with former lived experience with the child protection system, Michael knows firsthand the biases against fathers within the system. However, from this experience, Michael is forging a new movement to turn the approach to child well-being upside down. “Transforming the system is not enough – it needs to be abolished . . . the fundamental values of the system at its core are not the well-being of the child,” Michael shares.

The evidence shows that when children have more love surrounding them, they do better. They thrive on connections. Michael believes this speaks to why it is important for birth and foster parents to have collaborative, supportive relationships. Even in cases when birth parents supposedly fall short, a child has connections to their birth family – a need that must be met. Cultivating those foster-birth parent relationships means there are more people to love and keep a child safe.

When asked about the importance, in particular, of engaging fathers in these relationships, Michael reflected on his work experience. Historically, the infrastructure is not designed to support fathers. When foster parents support fathers, safety increases; there are more safety and placement options for children. Given the lack of father engagement, oftentimes workers do not even realize there is a whole slew of relative support and placement opportunities. Due to implicit bias against fathers in the child welfare system, there are young men today who grew up not knowing their biological fathers; this is the way they learned about fatherhood. If foster parents and child welfare professionals are able to reflect on those historical biases, it is possible to move forward by recognizing the value that fathers bring to their children’s lives. In Michael’s research, he notes the cultural programming asks and expects little of fathers. The system only expects their financial support and then their responsibility is fulfilled. If foster parents are able to reassure and involve fathers, they can bring fathers into the fold and show them that by being involved, they are not doing further harm.

When Michael’s organization worked with youth, he saw fathers as young as 13 years old, just children themselves, reckoning with the possibility that they might repeat what their fathers did and allow their child to grow up without them. The internal conflict these young fathers go through shows that they are seeking mentorship and an opportunity to change their future – not just looking for a way out of parenting through financial assistance. This could be an ideal opening to form a relationship with foster parents to nurture these young fathers and rewrite their stories.

Some of what Michael recommends in practice is approaching parents in a trauma-informed manner. Acknowledging that these fathers have gone through a lot in their lives, without passing judgment or allowing bias to affect one’s perspective is something that

Even in cases when birth parents supposedly fall short, a child has connections to their birth family – a need that must be met. Cultivating those foster-birth parent relationships means there are more people to love and keep a child safe.

can encourage fathers to open up and be in co-parenting relationships with foster parents. Seeing someone as an equal can remove the condescension and authoritarian nature that is often palpable in birth-foster parent interactions. Something to also consider is the manner in which men communicate. Michael notes that some men aren’t able to articulate their message clearly or communicate it at all. Again, this is an area in which a supportive relationship with a foster parent could promote healthy communication.

Michael also pointed out some key areas in which the system is failing men. For example, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a product that fathers can participate in as well. However, it is not clearly labeled or promoted as something for fathers to access. The inequitable language professionals and foster parents use is something that impacts fathers deeply.

Foster parents can be so valuable, but birth parents need to be trusted. Fathers are often alienated, and any foster parent should acknowledge and share what their role is with the father and include him in these very important conversations. When a dad is aware a foster parent is there to help and support while simultaneously investing in that relationship, only good things can come of it. Something



MICHAEL HUESCA

that Michael also strongly recommends are foster parents forming intentional relationships with the mother and the father. This might require splitting up opportunities for both parents, but it is still essential to include both parents. Ultimately, children having a positive male role model is very important. A child is missing a piece of themselves when their father

is not involved. Conversations around a father’s role or absence is imperative even if the father is not present. Although changing one’s frame of mind and rejecting cultural norms can feel impossible, Michael encourages foster parents to take up that challenge and keep doing the hard work to bring in fathers. The children and birth parents’ well-being will only be better for it.

Michael Huesca is chief executive officer at Paternal Opportunities, Programs and Services. Contact michaell@popsorganization.org

A Change in Perspective: My Story with CPS

Shawn Powell

As children we are so impressionable and creative that our brains fill in gaps to make sense of nonsensical information. As we grow and mature, we know more and have more experiences to draw from to fill in those gaps with valid information instead of unicorns and transformers. I do not ever remember being taught about the child welfare system in school. I learned about it when I was in middle school and a Child Protective Services (CPS) investigator came to meet with me at the police station. After a very uncomfortable and honest interview about the worst trauma I had ever experienced, the investigator disappeared and I never heard anything from her again. Once I was aware of what CPS was for, I started noticing whenever my classmates talked about it or when I heard it on the news. I heard stories of kids being stolen from parents,

talking to everyone I knew who had ever been involved with CPS, either as a child or as a parent. Each person I spoke with agreed and had their own reasons why I should not say anything. Bottomline message was to avoid the CPS investigator at all costs. With so many negative opinions coming at me about CPS, fueled by each individual's own experiences and perception, my fear of impending doom only grew bigger.

I was married with two little girls at the time. I was desperate for help and ashamed to need it at the same time. I only told the investigator half-truths, convinced myself I had everything under control, and still put myself first before my children. My girls were eventually removed from my home and placed with my mother. While I knew they would be well cared for there, I remember thinking

I wasn't ready to make changes in my life during my first dependency case. To be quite honest, I don't think I was ready the second time around either, but the difference was in how I was shown to trust and engage in meaningful relationships with everyone involved.

families being separated, never to see or speak to each other again. I was led to believe that the state somehow got paid more for each child they removed from the parents.

As teenagers and young adults, we see our friends make hard decisions about having sex, having relationships, and having babies. I had a friend in high school who had a baby her sophomore year and was clueless about how to be a mom. Her own mother was not around to teach her, so she was doing the best she could learning by doing. The baby's paternal grandmother would call her regularly and threaten to call CPS on this new mom. I was there to hear those phone calls many times, and it only fed the idea that CPS was something to fear and that they were going to come and rip my friend's baby away from her. From what I knew at that moment, nothing good was going to happen if CPS got involved.

When I had children of my own, I was confident that I was a good mom and knew how to take care of my babies and keep them safe. Unfortunately, when things in my life started to derail, I felt I had to keep it a secret. I did not want to give anyone a reason to call CPS or report anything that might destroy my family. Nonetheless, it did not take long for an investigator to reach out to let me know someone had made a report regarding the safety of my children and my lack of ability to parent them. I was so scared, frantically

to myself, "They told you this would happen. Weren't you warned about CPS stealing your kids? The social workers are going to do everything possible to keep your kids from you." Everything I had heard and come to believe about CPS was starting to happen to me.

The idea of social workers being rude or abrasive and downright mean to families continued to hold true when my assigned social worker lived up to that stereotype. I was talked down to, told I wasn't ever going to see my kids again, and I was told I didn't deserve to be in my kids' lives. I started to believe it and distanced myself from them. I stayed away from them while they lived with my mom. I avoided my social worker because she only made me feel worse whenever I talked to her. It took quite a while for me to come around and even attempt any kind of treatment or services. When it was all said and done, I no longer had my children, I was divorced, homeless, and still in active addiction. That result did nothing to help change the perception I had of CPS, and believe me, I was not shy in sharing how I felt with everyone around me. I had become the next person sharing all the horror stories and contributing to the bad reputation that has been given to the child welfare system.

About a year later, I gave birth to another little girl and CPS got involved when my baby was only three months old. I completely panicked. At this point, I knew that CPS



SHAWN POWELL

already took my older kids away from me and I didn't feel like anyone did anything to help me get them back. I did not trust CPS or anything to do with the department. I had this preconceived notion that CPS was bad and they were out to get me and take my child. I went dark, off the grid. I did not answer phone calls, knocks on the door, emails, or any attempt from CPS or the authorities to contact me. I even ignored the notice I received to appear in court for a 72 hour Shelter Care Hearing. It was not until my baby's dad was released from jail and the department threatened to issue an Amber Alert that I reluctantly turned over my child. As soon as we walked into the CPS office, a supervisor swiftly met me at the door and without hesitation, took the baby carrier out of my arms and rushed my baby into the back out of my sight. No kiss goodbye, no exchange of critical information about what formula she needed or what to do to get her to sleep. The experience was horrifying, and I was on high alert looking for any evidence to support the idea of the past repeating itself.

But this time was different. Although not every moment of the dependency case was smooth sailing, meeting the assigned social worker for the time sparked a change in my perception about my situation, about CPS, about my family, and most of all about my ability to be a parent. It was as if the social worker knew that my baby's dad and I arrived in that room to meet with him that day with years of emotional baggage, trauma, and our own truths about why we were even there. I was immediately impressed with how he saw us and truly believed we were good people, capable of being great parents. It was his mission to help us see it too and create a path for us to get there. I knew then, even after avoiding the CPS investigator, missing the first court hearing, and almost being charged with kidnapping, we were going to bring our little girl home. We didn't feel comfortable asking any of our friends or family for support during the early part of our case. We had spent several

Continued on page 43

Foster Care Workers as Family Defense Advocates

Vivek Sankaran, JD

Typically, when a child enters the foster care system, the system slowly starts a rote process to reunify the family. A case plan – one that is all too often basic and not individualized – is presented to the parent. A caseworker is tasked with assessing a parent's compliance with the tasks listed on the plan and agnostically reports a parent's progress to the court. A court dutifully convenes hearings every few months, listens to the compliance report, and issues orders accordingly. And at some point in the future – perhaps a year into the case or even sooner – it might determine that a parent hasn't complied with the plan and order the filing of a petition to permanently terminate the parent's relationship with the child.

of keeping families together. If any of us were asked to invest our money in a system with these outcomes, we would never do so.

But could a shift in mindset dramatically improve outcomes in child protection cases? Consider how radically different the system might look if foster care workers thought of themselves not as compliance managers, but as family defense advocates, tasked at doing **whatever it takes** to safely bring a family back together.

This mindset would infuse every step taken by a foster care worker. If a child has to enter foster care, then the worker would work with the parent to identify a family member or fictive kin to care for the child immediately.

But could a shift in mindset dramatically improve outcomes in child protection cases? Consider how radically different the system might look if foster care workers thought of themselves not as compliance managers, but as family defense advocates, tasked at doing **whatever it takes to safely bring a family back together.**

Tragically, we've all seen this process repeat itself over and over again in the child protection system. Unsurprisingly, the system fails to reunify families in more than 50 percent of cases and permanently destroys all too many families (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). Over 20 percent of children who entered foster care in 2013 had their right to their parents terminated within four years (ASPE, 2021). Annually, more children have their rights to their parents terminated than contract cancer, the leading cause of death by disease in children (Guggenheim, 2022). Nine times more children experience the permanent dissolution of their family than die in car accidents. These statistics and many others describe a system failing at its primary mission

They wouldn't let licensing requirements or agency policy stand in the way and would fight for discretion to honor the family's wishes. They would never allow a child to live with strangers when a familiar face is available.

They would start with the presumption that parenting time would be frequent and unsupervised and would only rebut that presumption if a substantial and documented safety risk existed. And even with that safety risk, they would look to have family members or foster parents supervise parenting time in the community. They would only have visits at an agency as a means of last resort. Advocates for a family would never want to allow family visits to occur at a shabby cubicle in a nondescript office.

Reasonable efforts, while perhaps

continuing to be the official legal standard, would no longer be this foster care worker's standard. Rather, they'd seek to make extraordinary efforts to get the family back together quickly. They would partner with the family to identify concrete barriers standing in the way of reunification and would work with community partners – legal aid lawyers, housing officials, public benefit workers, mental health professionals, church leaders, and others – to overcome them. No longer would the workers



VIVEK SANKARAN

stand up in court and report about a referral they made or a task the parent had to complete. Rather, they would describe the meetings they convened and attended with the parents in the community to connect the parent with the resources they need. They would describe the trips they took with parents to governmental and community agencies to apply for benefits. They would highlight to the court the supports missing in their community and request orders to enable the parent to get that help. The idea of passively reporting to the court what has or hasn't occurred in a reporting period would be anathema to this type of foster care worker. Rather, this worker – so intricately intertwined in the life of the parent – would fight to ensure that the parent has what they need to get their children back.

And when a child cannot return home, this foster care worker would never reflexively seek to permanently destroy relationships. Rather, they would carefully assess the child's relationship with their parent and seek creative ways to preserve that relationship while providing the child with the safety and stability they need. This might entail a custody agreement, a guardianship, or another creative arrangement that the family might develop. This new foster care worker – a family defense advocate – would never end a meaningful relationship simply to create a legal disposition.

The magical element of mindsets is that they don't cost a thing. Instead, they require us to make a choice. We must simply make a choice on how we respond to the crisis presented to us. If foster care workers respond to the crisis of children entering foster care by embracing the mindsets of family defense advocates, they could transform the child protection system overnight. And that transformation would be a big step toward the system finally fulfilling its intended promise.

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Lessons from ICWA Court and Community

Veronica Krupnick, interviewed by Mariel Carlson

Veronica's Story

Veronica spent a little less than four years, starting at age 6, in the foster care system in New Mexico before she was adopted at age 10. Her final adoptive home was her seventh placement in the system. How can a system designed for the well-being of children move a child through multiple homes when each time she had just begun to acclimate to a new school, new neighborhood, and new community? Veronica's sixth placement was with her grandfather; while with him, a family provided respite care to Veronica and her younger sibling. They never intended to be the long-term option, but in a positive twist to the story, this family became her adoptive family. Veronica identifies as Native American, and her biological sister identifies as both Black and Native American. However, their adoptive family is White. The experience of being a transracial adoptee after witnessing the conflict between her biological parents and being in numerous foster placements spurred her to take on a role as an advocate for foster children in the system.

one relationship over another. By keeping these doors open, connections remain and system-impacted children fare better.

How We Can Learn from Native Communities and Courts

Veronica reminded us that having Native folks representing Native children is key to supporting children via birth-foster parent relationships. It makes a difference when the people caring for children come from the same community because it adds a deeper level of understanding and compassion, especially for birth parents. If Native foster parents care for children of Native parents, there is a stronger drive to keep Native children in Native communities. There is an understanding that children are sacred – they are the future, and it is important to keep them in the community. By ensuring that everyone who supports the child is Native and they want the community connection to endure, foster parents will go above and beyond what we otherwise see in birth-foster parent relationships.



VERONICA KRUPNICK

the system is moving now, Veronica hopes that more value will be placed on the type of relationship that includes kin and not just blood relations. It is not difficult to imagine how a foster youth could feel more supported when foster parents include those folks in a child's life, not only birth parents.

The Missing Puzzle Pieces

From Veronica's experience living in the system and now as someone who works within it, she says one of the most common missing pieces is lack of awareness about access to resources for everyone involved. For example, birth family members often do not have a car and have to take a bus to get anywhere. The system, including foster parents, can easily turn around and vilify birth parents for "not trying hard enough" to make it on time for a visit or a parenting class. In reality, these services are located far from parents who are trying to travel by bus and bus schedules. For Native families who live on reservations that are geographically isolated, this rings especially true. Veronica pinpoints this frustration with a system that does not want to provide enough support and assistance to birth parents to fix issues preventing reunification including

A healthy birth-foster parent relationship is key: It becomes about supporting the child. The emotional and well-being of the child is preserved, and they do not have to choose between adults by prioritizing one relationship over another.

The Impact of Birth and Foster Parent Relationships

Veronica explained the painful experience of growing up in the system and feeling the tension of hostile relationships between birth and foster parents. "You might not have the words to explain what's happening in adult conversations...but you can feel the tension, the emotion in the room." She went on to explain how children are keenly aware of the disconnect, even when workers think they cannot see the strained relationships. This makes an already confusing situation more difficult, as children try to mentally figure out who is "more mom or dad." Children are torn over to whom they are supposed to owe loyalty. If a worker asks them who they would like to stay with –mom or foster parent – the worker is asking a child to make a decision that will become a lasting memory. This pressure puts too much on a child who likely is already bearing trauma and ambiguous loss beyond their years. This is why a healthy birth-foster parent relationship is key: It becomes about supporting the child. The emotional and well-being of the child is preserved, and they do not have to choose between adults by prioritizing

Something else that Veronica noted that is markedly different in Native communities is the extended definition of family and kin. Based on her experience growing up, the family network in Native communities is different from the dominant culture definition. In mainstream society, the definition of family is about blood relations. However, in Native

By ensuring that everyone who supports the child is Native and they want the community connection to endure, foster parents will go above and beyond what we otherwise see in birth-foster parent relationships.

communities, family members are not always blood or clan-related. There might be an aunt or uncle you always knew when growing up and see as your kin. However, this definition of family will not hold up in a court setting when supporting family connections for a child. However, foster parents can support these connections when including birth parents. For Native youth who are used to a family with numerous branches of extended family and kin and an open-door policy, it can be shocking to be in a home with a two-parent, nuclear Western family structure. In the direction

transportation, home safety, and more. For families of color, this discrepancy is even more pronounced, setting these families up to fail by not removing barriers.

Can Supportive Relationships Solve System Issues?

Veronica makes a logical point – the system asks foster parents to support two things at once that are inherently in contrast to one another: Attach with the child in order to be a permanent option but also support

reunification and birth parents. This ends up being very difficult for foster parents. What often ends up happening is a “fight” over who will take best care of the child. Finding and recruiting foster parents who understand the importance of reunification for children is important. Being a truly temporary foster parent rather than a foster-to-adopt parent is key – they should be foster parents with the sole intention of returning children to their birth families. “Disney did us no favors,” Veronica says as she laughs. These movies paint a picture of adopting the perfect child – one with no birth family who loved them, no trauma, and no history of abuse. Reality is complicated, and it is easy to forget a person’s entire experience.

Professionals often throw around phrases such as “the best interests of the child” and “trauma-informed care.” If anyone is going into this field – foster parents, social workers, attorneys, judges – they need to do serious self-reflection before entering the room. Being a foster parent requires that you remove your own interests and wants from your position. Too often it becomes about a person’s ego, and they hide behind the aforementioned phrases, claiming to be acting in the best interests of the



child. In reality, their actions and intentions do not line up. It is critical that our foster parents come to the table with a level of self-awareness in order to ethically enter the arena of child welfare and support birth parent relationships.

Veronica Krupnick is coordinator for the Mentorship, Advocacy and Peer Support (MAPS) Program at CASA First Judicial District. Contact veronica@casafirst.org

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The Essential Nature of Humility: Seeing the Birth Parent as a Whole Person

Bridget Sabo, JD

I am a defense attorney for parents involved in child protection cases. In this role, I have the honor of working closely with birth parents at some very difficult moments. One of the hardest moments is when a parent first learns that the county has taken their children and placed them in foster care. Parents' panic and fear is immediate and understandable. They rarely know exactly why their children were taken or where their children are. Oftentimes, they have to wait two to three days until the first court hearing to get even basic information.

more easily. In addition, most relative foster parents have far more context about a birth parent and are more likely to have a more balanced view of the parent. They might have witnessed the birth parent's incredible resilience after a loss or remember how the birth parent made them laugh when no one else could. These past positive experiences engender empathy and encouragement. Advocating for empathy and encouragement may sound odd coming from a lawyer, but I know firsthand what a powerful difference they can make in

Birth parents, even very flawed birth parents, are essential to their children's identity and well-being.

Many of the birth parents I represent are already dealing with nearly incomprehensible levels of adversity when their children are placed in foster care. Some experienced foster care themselves or with other children and are consumed with the trauma of that prior experience. When parents learn that their children may be placed with a non-relative foster provider, their distress multiplies. Most birth parents I work with feel misunderstood by professionals and by non-relative foster parents. They doubt that they or their children will be anything but harmed by the child protection system. I know why they feel this way. The child protection system is grounded in judgments that can be arbitrary and subjective. People with authority form opinions that too often are grounded in bias, privilege, and emotion. Complicated family dynamics and nuanced personal histories get reduced to a laundry list of labels including mental health, substance use, trauma, homelessness, domestic violence, physical and cognitive disabilities.

While these labels may accurately summarize a real challenge in a birth parent's life, they are overly broad and dismissive of the parent as a whole person. They are also distancing and tend to further the narrative that the birth parent is dangerous and risky while the foster parent is safe and protective. The truth, of course, is much more complicated. Birth parents, even very flawed birth parents, are essential to their children's identity and well-being. Foster parents, even very well-intentioned foster parents, can cause considerable harm to the children in their care. Recognizing this duality is essential to building productive connections between birth and foster parents.

One of the reasons relative foster care is so often preferable to non-relative foster care is because relatives know and often love birth parents. Trust between birth and relative foster parents is generally more natural and comes

the trajectory of a child protection case.

Trust, affection, and support between birth and foster parents is critical to achieving reunification, which should be the goal of every child protection case. While this may be easier in a relative placement, it is possible in a non-relative placement as well. In non-relative foster placements, humility becomes an essential value. Birth parents' humility is assured; who can be more humble than someone whose children were taken by the state because they "weren't doing a good job?" Foster parent humility is much more discretionary, and thus, even more powerful. It can be easy for foster parents to feel superior to and frustrated by birth parents. What little they know about a birth parent may lead them to be fearful or angry with a birth parent. They may assume that their foster children's challenging behavior is entirely the fault of the birth parent. When foster parents inhabit a place of true humility – recognizing all that they don't and can't know about a birth parent and their family – they create space to build a functional and positive relationship.

A strong connection between birth and foster parents benefits everyone, especially children. When birth parents develop some level of trust and comfort with a foster parent, they are more able to focus on addressing the challenges that brought the case into the child protection system. They are also more willing to provide information on their children's care, which helps a foster parent better meet the children's needs. Similarly, when foster parents positively regard birth parents, the foster parents are more likely to share frequent updates and include the birth parent in important appointments and events. Birth parents often feel sidelined and hopeless when their children are out of their care. Continuing to be included in their children's lives, particularly in regular and informal ways, helps birth parents build capacity and maintain motivation.



BRIDGET SABO

When birth and foster parents are able to work together and communicate well reunification often happens faster and more securely. Unfortunately, the converse is also true. If foster parents feel uncomfortable with birth parents, for example, they may be reluctant to supervise visits in their home between birth parents and their children. This usually leads to fewer visits between birth parent and child because third party supervised visitation is a more limited resource. It also lessens the opportunity for birth and foster parents to share information and updates. This stalled communication means reunification will take longer. Judges prefer to reunify on a graduated schedule that often begins with supervised visits, then moves to unsupervised visits, then a trial home visit, and then reunification with protective supervision. If supervised visits are infrequent, parents often cannot move to unsupervised visits. In addition, a birth parent who hasn't been informed of attending important school or medical appointments may be seen by the judge as not yet ready to take back full parenting responsibilities.

Beyond the practical implications to a child protection case, developing a positive connection between birth and foster parents is the right thing to do. Birth parents face an abundance of judgment, shame, and self-doubt. Not many have experienced the kind of love, consistency, and safety that they want for their children. Birth parents don't need more people waiting for them to fail; they need as many people as possible cheering them on. Foster parents who can connect authentically and demonstrate genuine care for a birth parent can build strong, transformative relationships that benefit them, birth parents, and, most importantly, children.

Bridget Sabo, JD is a parent defense attorney at Hennepin County Adult Representation Services. She has provided pro bono representation to relative kin through the Institute to Transform Child Protection and was a Permanency Specialist at Ampersand Families.

Importance of Building Supportive Relationships

Shana King

A child removed from their birth family and placed in foster care is powerless, pulled between their love for their birth parent and the stability provided by the foster parent. When the birth parent and foster parent work together to support the child, the child's tension lessens. The child's sources of love and trust increase. The child experiences a healthy, united support system and feels safe in their new environment. Relationships established between the child, the birth parent, and the foster parent can endure long after the placement ends and even after the child becomes an adult. The child wins.

When the birth parent and foster parent fail to connect, the child is torn. The child must choose. When that happens, the child loses.

A supportive caseworker is the child's best hope. The caseworker can serve as the bridge between the foster family and the birth family. In Minnesota the caseworker is statutorily required to place a "comfort call" with the foster family to the birth family within seventy-two hours of placement to "set the stage for partnership and coparenting between the family and foster family" (Quality Parenting Initiative Minnesota, 2021).

I have experienced this three-way dynamic as a foster child, as a birth parent with children in foster care, and as a parent mentor at the ICWA Law Center in Minneapolis working with birth parents whose children are in placement. I know personally how adults can fail the child or set the child on a path to lasting support.

Before the adults can support the child, they must support each other by proactively addressing the most common fears and misperceptions. The foster parent must assure the birth parent that they will not cut off the child from the birth family. The birth parent must assure the foster parent they will not undermine the foster parent's temporary authority. When foster and birth parents support each other in that way, the child gains additional support.

I grew up in four different foster homes. None of them connected with my birth family,

nor did I establish a lasting relationship with any foster families. Those were not good experiences. I lost out all around. Today, I have a poor relationship with my mother, no relationship with my father, and no connection to the families where I resided. Ultimately, I do not have a family beyond my children. That was avoidable.

Decades later my children entered placement when I was incarcerated. For 33 days I had no idea where my children were placed. Nobody consulted me about school, haircutting, or any cultural practices. There was no cooperation, and when I tried to cooperate, I was rebuffed. Permanent medical decisions were made about my children without any input from me.

My experience as a parent was especially appalling because I am a native mother of native children, and my family observes cultural practices that non-native families do not know without asking. I was never asked. No cultural practices were observed for my

My experience as a parent was especially appalling because I am a native mother of native children, and my family observes cultural practices that non-native families do not know without asking.

children. This is precisely the thing that can be avoided by open and active contact between foster parents and birth parents. As the birth parent, I had the expertise about my children and their culture. That expertise was ignored, and my children suffered.

Although my experiences as a child and a parent were unhappy, as a parent mentor I have seen how much children can benefit from positive relationships between birth parents and foster parents. Children gain an extra family to support them. The birth parents and foster parents, united in their common interest in the children, can establish their own mutually supportive relationships. For example, I know of foster families who have temporarily hired birth parents after a case closes to help the birth family in a financial crisis. This allows the child



SHANA KING

to stay connected with the foster family and the birth family and therefore stay out of the system. That is a classic win-win arrangement.

Not every connection will be so robust, but the attempt must be made. It starts with the caseworker and the initial call from the foster family to the birth family. Then the foster parents and the birth parent must make the time and effort to connect with one another. There is no magic formula. Birth parents and foster parents invariably begin as total strangers,

and communication with strangers can be challenging under the best circumstances. The beginning of a child protection case is, by definition, not the best of circumstances. Yet when the birth parent and foster parent accept the challenge to communicate with each other for the good of the child, the child wins. Building that relationship at the beginning can make a difference for both families and that relationship can last beyond a case plan.

Shana King is parent mentor and community outreach advocate at ICWA Law Center. Contact Shana@icwlc.org



Youth Deserve Support to Connect with Birth Families

Dominique Mikell Montgomery, AM, interviewed by Mariel Carlson and Ariana King

A current doctoral candidate at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs in the Department of Social Welfare, Dominique Mikell Montgomery has over 10 years of experience working with individuals impacted by the foster care system. Her current research is a youth participatory action project entitled, *We Are the Dream and the Hope. We Rise: Wellness as Rootedness Reconceptualized with Older Youth Impacted by the Child Welfare System* or "Rooted" for short, is co-led with system-impacted young people ages 18-up.

When asked why she decided on a participatory approach, Mikell Montgomery said that it is crucial to center the voices of those affected by the system because only they can say how the child welfare system can better serve them.

Birth Family Contact: A Universal Theme

In the decade she has been doing this work, Mikell Montgomery states that a universal theme from system-impacted youth is their desire to have more contact with their birth

narrative is not challenged by the child welfare system, how can we possibly expect birth parents and foster parents to want to form genuine connections?

The Agency's Role in Promoting Foster and Birth Parent Connections

One of the most essential tools child welfare agencies can provide foster families is training on how to engage and interact with birth parents. Currently, there is not much support for foster families in navigating those complex dynamics of what their role is versus the birth parents or how to set and respect boundaries on birth parent visits. Rather, current practice often places foster families and birth families in an adversarial dynamic. Agencies must consider their role to support foster families and birth families to participate in regular positive dialogues so that these complex dynamics can be managed. If agencies want to genuinely support positive relationships between the youth, their birth family, and their foster family, they also need to set up supports that allow young

At the end of the day, young people want supportive services to help them have a happy and healthy relationship with their family even if they cannot currently live with them.

families. Some youth wish their families had been given more support so they could have always been placed with them while other youth appreciated being placed but found the emotional disconnection from their family harmful. As they become young adults and age out of the system, the absence of those relationships hurts them emotionally and developmentally, and they often are not given the opportunity to form other social connections to help their transition out of care. Many of the youth she has worked with have been particularly upset at being deprived of sibling connections. Even when they are allowed to visit siblings, those visits are often supervised and take place in age-inappropriate settings such as a child play area with small tables and crayons for teenagers, for example, which does not allow for a genuine, meaningful connection.

When it comes to contact with birth parents, it is a lot harder to make that happen because of negative narratives and messaging about birth parents. They are often viewed as villains—dysfunctional and abusive people who "shouldn't have kids." Meanwhile, foster parents are championed as heroes for "saving" system-impacted youth. These stereotypical narratives greatly impact youth as they attempt to navigate these relationships and often do not align with their lived experiences. If this

people to speak authentically with their birth parents. While this could include more formal services such as family therapy, youth should also be given space to speak with their families where they aren't "under a microscope." Many system-impacted youth express concern and regret that they ended up in care because of misunderstandings or misinterpretations of things they said and are wary of speaking in front of professionals. To alleviate that burden on young people and families, agencies must give them space where they will not feel punished for being honest about their feelings. At the end of the day, young people want supportive services to help them have a happy and healthy relationship with their family even if they cannot currently live with them.

Advice to Foster Families

While support from child welfare agencies and more nuanced societal messaging about birth parents would greatly help non-relative foster families connect with birth parents, some of that work still must be done on an individual level. Mikell Montgomery recommends that foster families lead their interactions with birth families from a non-judgmental lens in order to realize that the birth family's dynamics are "just as complex as theirs." The understanding that no family, including their own, is without



DOMINIQUE MIKELL MONTGOMERY

trauma or difficulties is a big step. Foster families may not know the entire story, but they can recognize that the birth family tried their best to deal with their trauma and challenging contexts that were outside their control and things just have not worked out the way they wanted.

Mikell Montgomery also notes that kin foster families have an incredibly tough job because kinship placement creates new, complex family dynamics that they most likely did not expect. "The fact that it's more natural doesn't make it easier," Mikell Montgomery emphasizes. To help navigate those dynamics, it is so important that kin foster parents and birth parents have access to peer support groups who understand the challenges of this type of foster care. After everything the family has gone through, they do not need the additional struggle of navigating new, family dynamics without support.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, a decade of working with system-impacted youth has taught Mikell Montgomery that creating supports for youth to stay connected to birth families is essential. Separating families physically and emotionally is harmful and we must do everything we can to prevent that outcome during a family's trajectory of child welfare involvement. Child welfare workers can do this by providing supportive services that keep families together whenever possible, actively dispelling stereotypes that paint birth families as solely dysfunctional and focusing on families' strengths, providing space for youth to authentically connect away from the scrutiny of child protection, and training foster parents on how to navigate relationships with birth parents in a constructive and supportive manner. It is only with more support that system-impacted youth will get the services and healthy connections they deserve.

Dominique Mikell Montgomery, AM is a PhD candidate at UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs in the Department of Social Welfare, child welfare scholar and abolitionist educator Contact dominiquem@ucla.edu

Ethical Child Welfare Practices in Native American Communities: Active Efforts

Amber Scott, CFS social worker

I have been working as an Indian Child Welfare Caseworker for the Choctaw Nation since 2016. All of my cases are currently in the State of California; however, I have had cases in many other states including Washington, Colorado, Missouri, Georgia, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Florida. At one time I was carrying a caseload of around 70 cases and did for most of my career with Choctaw Nation. My caseload was recently reduced to carry between 40 to 50 cases.

When Choctaw children are involved in a child protective service case in a state I am assigned to, I typically intervene on behalf of the tribe as a legal party, although the tribe can request exclusive jurisdiction of the case. My job is to make sure the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) is being applied correctly.

Per ICWA, it is the child protective services agency's burden to make sure active efforts are provided to the families. However, providing active efforts is not limited to those at the agency. The tribe, attorneys, and even the court can assist the family by providing active efforts. For example, I have seen a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) worker go above and beyond for a particular family. The CASA worker took the child on outings, gave them one-on-one attention, helped the child adjust to their foster home, and went into the home during visits between parent and child to assist the parent with parenting techniques during the visit.

Parents who are incarcerated should also be provided active efforts. Some caseworkers have difficulty devising active efforts for parents



AMBER SCOTT

Diligent searches for extended family members or Native American foster homes are an active effort. Diligent means having or showing care and importance in the task. This is more than just making a few phone calls. It's important for the state agencies to develop a working relationship with their local Native American Tribes and reaching out to them individually every time the agency is trying to find a Native foster home for Native children in state custody. Placing Native American children with their extended family is extremely important in preserving the family unit and helping the Native American child stay connected to their family and culture. Knowing where one comes from is important when a child is developing their identity. Parents are also a great resource when it comes to finding extended family who can take placement of the children.

Amber Scott is a social worker with Choctaw Nation Children and Family Services. Contact help@choctawnation.com

Active efforts are more of a reflection of the attitude of the person providing them. The attitude or approach of helping the family reunify and doing whatever is in your abilities to help the family overcome their specific barriers most accurately defines active efforts.

Active efforts are an important part of ICWA. Ensuring active efforts are being provided to the families is crucial to reunification in ICWA cases. Active efforts are efforts provided to the family above and beyond the reasonable efforts routinely given: This means taking extra steps and extra time to help families overcome any barriers that are prohibiting reunification.

Every case can look different when it comes to active efforts. Unfortunately, workers who are providing the active efforts often treat active efforts as a checklist. That includes things such as referring to services, transportation, bus passes, etc. Although these things are considered active efforts, they should not be a list of things that need to be completed in all cases so they can be marked off the list. Active efforts are more of a reflection of the attitude of the person providing them. The attitude or approach of helping the family reunify and doing whatever is in your abilities to help the family overcome their specific barriers most accurately defines active efforts. When stating what active efforts were provided, one must explain why this particular effort was made for this family. Active efforts are ongoing actions and not only completed at the beginning of the case. Offering services to parents is a reasonable effort, but this is not always considered an active effort because parents in all CPS cases are routinely offered services.

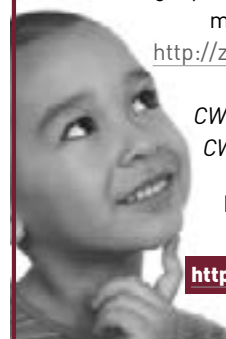
who are incarcerated, but there are possibilities for positive interventions. For example, parents who are incarcerated can be provided with letter writing supplies that will allow them to write letters to their children. The child can color half of a coloring page or draw half of a drawing then mail it to the parent who is incarcerated to color or draw the other half of the page. Pictures of the children can be sent to parents and pictures of parents and other family members can be provided to the child. Consistent contact between the social worker and the incarcerated parent is very important. Parents who are incarcerated want to know what is going on with their case and with their children. They may feel like they are not involved when decisions are being made about their children's lives without their involvement. I have spoken to incarcerated parents who are relieved when they are able to speak to someone who can give them updates with their case. This also can be said for those who are in an inpatient rehabilitation facility for substance abuse or mental health services. Not all prisons provide services to incarcerated parents that could assist them with completing services on their case plan, but the prison can be contacted to find out if services are available and, if available, what might be beneficial to the parent in question.

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Approaching Parenting of Children in Foster Care as a “We” Job: Supporting Birth Families for Success

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the resource parent is trying to replace them but may be because they are mimicking other children in the house. For teens, parents can understand that school-age children may be seeking to maintain their privacy and normalcy with school classmates.

This developmental information should be provided to parents immediately so they are prepared. Facilitating opportunities for peer parent partners to share their own and other’s lived experiences may allow parents to understand their child’s behavior and not take it personally.

Preparing for a Shared Successful Future

It’s also helpful to engage birth parents in considering that once their child returns home, the resource parent can be a great support in making the child’s transition as smooth as possible. Birth parents can continue systems resource parents have implemented during the child’s time in their home including bedtime routines and homework habits to give their child more continuity. Even more critically, parents can plan together to maintain their relationship post-reunification so that the child does not experience further loss.

Victoria Camper is a site support advocate for the Youth Law Center’s Quality Parenting Initiative and a Florida-based parent, advocate, and child welfare worker. Victoria brings her lived experience as a birth parent whose children have spent time in the foster care system. During Victoria’s time in QPI, she has designed and led training sessions with birth and resource parents with a wide variety of experiences, learned perspectives, and insights that help birth parents work through challenges of participating in these relationships.

Brandy Hudson is a national director for the Youth Law Center’s Quality Parenting Initiative, leading innovation to transform foster care systems across the nation so every child and youth can thrive. Brandy brings experience working with and in child welfare agencies supporting reform as well as her own lived experience as a former foster and probation youth, child welfare involved parent, and licensed kinship provider. Across her career, Brandy has led advocacy efforts to elevate and center the voice and expertise of those most impacted by child welfare and juvenile justice systems as leaders and designers of system transformation.

Fostering Family Connections – Three Small Changes with Big Impacts for Families

Continued from page 23

In conclusion, recognizing the importance and value of parent and caregiver relationships – to the child and to the families – should be an essential component of daily practice. By emphasizing the importance of realistic expectations, and the critical value of this relationship to children, while also providing parents and caregivers with relationship support and education, we can set up both parents and caregivers for success.

Katie Biron, BS, BSN is a resource parent and the director of Fostering Connections For Families. Contact [Katie Biron@outlook.com](mailto:Katie.Biron@outlook.com)

Alliance CaRES: Supporting Caregivers by Supporting Family Connections

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where local caregivers can meet in person to share resources, connect sibling groups, and build relationships. They are a natural place for caregivers who do not know each other but have siblings placed in their home to establish mutual parameters for ongoing sibling visits. In combination, the community groups, supportive training groups, and CaRES mentors support a positive and normalized relationship between the caregivers and the child’s community – a tremendous benefit for the child and their relationship with their biological family (Chateaufneuf et al., 2018).

Supporting caregivers often means helping them navigate the unexpected aspects of fostering. Caregivers do not often express surprise at behavior challenges or system complexities; however, shifting the parenting mindset to include co-parenting with the biological family requires intentional practice and ongoing support. Alliance CaRES comes alongside caregivers at strategic points to guide them toward a broader view of their fostering role and to give them resources and support to engage with the biological family as part of their love for the child.

Shana Burres, MEd is the Alliance CaRES lead mentor coordinator at the Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence Caregiver Retention Education and Support program at the University of Washington School of Social Work. Contact srburres@uw.edu

A Change in Perspective: My Story with CPS

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of the previous years destroying any positive relationships. However, we did develop a rapport with our social worker, our attorneys, the assigned Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), the visitation supervisor and transporter, and even the foster parents who cared for our baby girl.

Our social worker helped us by providing an incredible amount of hope. We were empowered to make our own decisions regarding our family. I felt I was given all the information I needed to make the best decisions I could during a time of such emotional turmoil. I grew stronger and more confident as I started to see a clear path to reunification with my daughter. If not for the support of our social worker and the other professionals on our team, there is no telling how our story would have ended. I would have continued to believe all the negative ideas about the system, CPS, and the courts. I would have continued to feed my addiction just to numb the immense shame and regret for my bad choices.

Today, I am the Parents for Parents Program Coordinator in King County, Washington. I seek out opportunities to share my story. I share my story with other parents who are involved in the child welfare system to help give them hope. I share my story with attorneys, CASAs, social workers, investigators, and even judges. By sharing my story, and the success stories of other families like mine, I hope to begin to dismantle the negative ideas people have about the system which become a huge barrier for parents to be successful. I wasn’t ready to make changes in my life during my first dependency case. To be quite honest, I don’t think I was ready the second time around either, but the difference was in how I was shown to trust and engage in meaningful relationships with everyone involved.

Some might say the system is broken. But is it? The system is made up of humans helping other humans. The bad reputation the system has cannot be blamed on one individual or one situation. It is a culmination of testimonies, and we are all responsible for taking actions to change it. We have to take the time and be willing to recognize the good that is done by the system too, not just the scary stories. So, I encourage parents with their own success stories to step up and celebrate the community of people it took to make it happen. Let us share our stories of hope with other families who may be struggling to get past the negative ideas about the child welfare system and empower them to make the changes and ask for the support they need to create a success story of their own.

Shawn Powell is the Parent for Parents program coordinator in King County, WA. Contact spowell@kingcounty.gov

Resources

This list of resources is compiled with input from CW360° authors and editors as well as CASCW staff.

Governmental Organizations & Resources

- Administration for Children and Families <https://www.acf.hhs.gov>
- Children's Bureau <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb>
- Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/>
- National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare <https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/>
- SAMHSA <https://www.samhsa.gov/>
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services <https://www.hhs.gov/>

National Organizations & Resources

- Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence <https://allianceforchildwelfare.org/>
- Annie E. Casey Foundation www.aecf.org
- Better Youth Inc. <http://betteryouth.org/NewBY/>
- Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) <https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bfpp/>
- California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare <https://www.cebc4cw.org/>
- Casey Family Programs <https://www.casey.org/>
- CHERISH Kindering <https://cherish.kindering.org/>
- Child Welfare League of America <https://www.cwla.org/>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway <https://www.childwelfare.gov/>
- Children and Family Futures <https://www.cffutures.org/>
- Children's Trust Fund Alliance <https://ctfalliance.org/>
- ICWA Law Center <https://icwlc.org>
- Foster Club <https://www.fosterclub.com/>
- National Child Welfare Workforce Institute <https://www.ncwwi.org>
- National Indian Child Welfare Association <https://www.nicwa.org>
- Quality Parenting Initiative <https://www.qpi4kids.org/>
- Youth Law Center <https://www.ylc.org/>

Additional Reading, Resources, and Tools

ICWA

- U.S. Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs <https://www.bia.gov/bia/ois/dhslcwa>
- ICWA Law Center (Mpls) <https://www.icwlc.org/>
- Capacity Building Center for Tribes, ICWA Active Efforts as Prevention: Working Together for Better Outcomes [Webinar] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX2aktmIKvc>
- National Indian Child Welfare Association, *The Indian Child Welfare Act: A Family's Guide* <https://www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Family-Guide-to-ICWA-2018.pdf>
- The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, *The Indian Child Welfare Act and Active Efforts: Past and Present* <https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/the-indian-child-welfare-act-and-active-efforts-past-and-present/>

Father Engagement

- CWIG resources: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/engaging/fathers/>
- YouTube video San Diego father helps dads working to reunify with kids <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JQX4HL7IXQ>
- CHARMED Study: Co Parenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/coparenting-and-healthy-relationship-and-marriage-education-dads-charmed>
- Tip Card for Fatherhood Practitioners CHARMED resource for supporting healthy relationships https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource_files/tipcard_building_partnerships_v3_508.pdf
- U.S. Dept of HHS Overview of All Dads Matter Fatherhood Program: https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource_files/e000004136.pdf

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE):

- Fathers and Continuous Learning (FCL) <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/fathers-and-continuous-learning>
- Supporting Healthy Relationships in Fatherhood Programs <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/resources-supporting-healthy-relationships-fatherhood-programs>
- Coparenting Relationship Education for Fatherhood Programs <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/improving-coparenting-relationship-education-fatherhood-programs-strategies-engaging-coparents>

Families Affected by Incarceration

- Parenting Inside Out Curriculum <http://www.parentinginsideout.org>
- Child Information Gateway: Child Welfare Practice with Families Affected by Parental Incarceration Information Packet <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/parental-incarceration/>
- Children's Bureau: Resource Page <https://cblcc.acf.hhs.gov/topic-areas/incarceration-old/policies/>
- Advocates for Children of Incarcerated Parents <https://www.afcoip.org/>

Kinship Care

- Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory Redlich Horwitz Foundation & ChildFocus, <https://www.childfocuspartners.com/tools-publications/foster-kinship-parent-recruitment-and-support-best-practice-inventory>
- Casey Family Programs Article, *Make Kinship Care The Norm* https://www.casey.org/adapting-home-studies-for-kin/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=spotlightjune22

Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)

- Q&A with QPI: "How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?" <https://www.casey.org/qpi-q-and-a/>
- Imprint Article, *Minnesota Works For Quality Parenting in Foster Families - The Imprint* <https://imprintnews.org/foster-care/minnesota-works-for-quality-parenting-in-foster-families/63833>

Resources continued

- *Voices from the field audio recording: How can birth and foster parents partner to achieve reunification?* <https://www.casey.org/birth-and-foster-parent-partnerships/>
 - *Comfort Calls Brochure* <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c4f369bb27e391407cabe68/t/60b8f0764848d052f2c111e7/1622732918824/Comfort+Call+Brochure+2021.pdf>
- ### Reunification/Shared Parenting
- *Shared Family Care and Shared Parenting* <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/support-services/familycare/>
 - *Reunifying Families* https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=elertjune22
 - *Equipping Foster Parents to Actively Support Reunification* https://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/AUSK/Publications/equipping-foster-parents-to-support-reunification-web508.pdf
 - *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP)* <https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sfbf4965b0cb04a4cb3aee4a034aa2042>
 - *A State and Local Leaders Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation* <https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sec3f22c53ca04100a128ff2369207b82>
- ### Substance Use
- *“Disrupting the Stigma: How Understanding, Empathy, and Connection Can Improve Outcomes for Families Affected by Substance Use and Mental Disorders”* <https://mcsacu.acf.hhs.gov/topics/parental-substance-use-disorder.aspx#highlighted-resource>
 - *Review and Expunction of Central Registries and Reporting Records* <https://bit.ly/3xuCzmn>
 - *Collaborative Values Inventory (CVI)* <https://www.cffutures.org/tool/collaborative-values-inventory-cvi/>
 - *“Assessing Values Within Collaborative Interventions for Families with Parental Substance use and Child Welfare Involvement”* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10522158.2021.1896614>
 - *Putting the Pieces Together: Harnessing the Power of Parenting Time to Strengthen the Parent-Child Relationship and Support Reunification Efforts in Your Family Treatment Court* <https://www.cffutures.org/ftc-practice-academy/putting-the-pieces-together-harnessing-the-power-of-parenting-time-to-strengthen-the-parent-child-relationship-and-support-reunification-efforts-in-your-family-treatment-court/>
 - *Role of Resource Parents in Supporting Family Recovery and Reunification* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuT5r3ZnUA8>
- ### System Impacted Individuals
- *System-Impacted Youth Must Lead Conversations on Reimagining Child Welfare* <https://imprintnews.org/youth-voice/system-impacted-youth-must-lead-conversations-on-reimagining-child-welfare/63098>
 - *Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, Leading with Lived Experience: How Impacted Youth and Families Can Drive System Transformation [Webinar]* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOLEf0cbi6Q&ab_channel=CenterforJuvenileJusticeReform
 - *Lutheran Social Services of MN, Resources & Information for Youth in Foster Care* <https://www.lssmn.org/services/families/foster-care/youth>
 - *Legal Center for Foster Care & Education* <https://www.fostercareandeducation.org/>
 - *Youth.Gov, Youth Involved with the Juvenile Justice System* <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/juvenile-justice/youth-involved-juvenile-justice-system>

Agency Discussion Guide

The Agency Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions during supervision and team meetings about the information presented in the issue.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. Kim discusses the history of child welfare in the U.S. As a child welfare worker, have you been taught about or reflected on the history of foster care and adoption as it relates to separating children from their birth families?
2. The *Parenting Inside Out (PIO)* program had a significant positive impact on parent-child relationships and helped many incarcerated parents take a more active role in parenting even from far away. However, given the stigma of incarceration, it may be hard to provide opportunities like this to other incarcerated parents. Do you hold bias against incarcerated parents? What societal messaging do you receive?
3. Sankaran writes about a shift from seeing foster care workers as *compliance managers* to *family defense advocates*. Does this resonate for you? What are some ways in which your perspective on the role of Child Protection workers have changed over time, if at all?
4. Bermejo and Bond address several stereotypes about families struggling with substance use, such as “once an addict, always an addict.” What other stereotypes about birth parents/families are present in your communities and agencies? How can you combat this?
5. In her article, Sabo talks about the importance of humility for foster parents when working with birth parents. This recognition that they don’t and can’t know a birth parent and their family’s story helps set them up for a positive relationship when they see birth parents as whole people. What are the ways in which you practice humility in your work with birth parents?

Discussion on Practice Implementation

1. Both Tift & Tift and the CHarMED study discussed engaging fathers in the child welfare system. What strategies can you and/or your organization use to engage fathers in coparenting?
2. Roleplay a conversation with colleagues as a caseworker, parent, and resource parent regarding a challenging experience in the relationship (pick a familiar scenario). Consider changing roles. Reflect on your experience in the different roles.
3. In Jacobs and Hermann's article, discuss the experiences of some youth in care they've met in their line of work. Consider the ways in which the narratives of Daniel, Zeke, and Emma changed after being connected to their birth family. Now recall a time that you worked with a transition-aged youth or those aging out of the system. What might you do differently to connect them with family?
4. Jacobs and Hermann remind readers that the purpose and importance of birth parents and family to youth in care extends beyond their ability to provide "adequate care." How might you frame your conversations with youth around birth family so that they come away with a new perspective of their family? If this is not possible, what else might you do to support youth in exploring their birth family identity?
5. What steps can our communities and agencies take to center the voices of foster youth during their time in care and outside of it on a policy/macro level?
6. As a practitioner, what are some strategies you can use to help system impacted children if birth and foster parents fail to connect? How can you help them foster a positive relationship with both families?
7. How do you define active efforts in terms of child welfare? How does this change—if at all—when dealing with Native families?

Discussion on Agency & System-Level Changes

1. In her article, Rodriguez lists many steps agencies can take to better foster relationships between birth and foster parents. Which of these steps has your agency taken? What are your agency's strengths and what can they improve upon?
2. Biron discusses many ways that the trauma of separation impacts children. Many times we hear that children in the child welfare system have a lot of "behaviors." How does your agency educate both birth and foster parents about the trauma of separation to strengthen understanding of and contextualize children's behavior? (Biron)
3. Consider how policies and the overall child welfare system often hinder kinship caregivers and families from collaborating. What would need to happen in order for parents and kinship caregivers to be able to work together more effectively?
4. BFPP works to publish materials on how to support positive birth and foster parent relationships. Are these materials something your agency would use? How would you implement it? Be concrete.
5. Camper and Hudson list several QPI practices that provide early support and ongoing communication between foster parents and birth parents. These include: comfort calls, ice breakers, redesigning family time, and offering peer support. Which of these strategies can you implement in your role as a child welfare worker? How can you advocate for using QPI practices in your organization/place of employment?
6. To make co-parenting a reality in foster care, Favale had to pilot an entirely new program within her agency. Reflect on your agency's progress towards creating positive co-parenting relationships between foster parents and birth parents. What institutional or systemic barriers make this difficult to implement?
7. What are 3 major changes you'd like to see in the child welfare system in the next 20 years related to supporting parents and caregivers?



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The Phoenix Learning Xchange (PLX) is an interactive, multidisciplinary, non-credit certificate program. PLX aims to broaden the knowledge of the development, challenges, positive engagement and wellbeing of youth and adolescents involved in the child welfare and other systems.

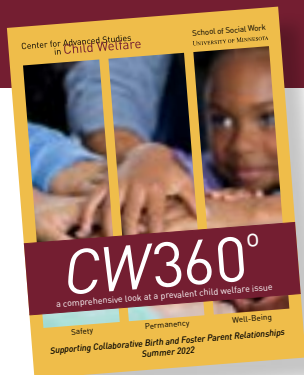
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About CW360°

Child Welfare 360° (CW360°) is an annual publication that provides communities, child welfare professionals, and other human service professionals comprehensive information on the latest research, policies and practices in a key area affecting child well-being today. The publication uses a multidisciplinary approach for its robust examination of an important issue in child welfare practice and invites articles from key stakeholders, including families, caregivers, service providers, a broad array of child welfare professionals (including educators, legal professionals, medical professionals and others), and researchers. Social issues are not one dimensional and cannot be addressed from a single vantage point. We hope that reading CW360° enhances the delivery of child welfare services across the country while working towards safety, permanency and well-being for all children and families being served.

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In This Issue of CW360°

- Research, resources, and best practices for cultivating and supporting relationships between birth and foster families
- Practices to cultivate positive relationships that promote family engagement and successful reunification, including shared parenting
- Information to help mitigate potential challenges that may come from shared parenting
- Tools to engage fathers and incarcerated parents involved in co-parenting in the child welfare system
- Strategies to preserve Native culture and heritage in the foster care system
- Multiple Perspectives and insights on how child welfare workers can improve practices to support and preserve the well-being of the child
- Specific Strategies that address practices that child welfare workers can use to implement systems change
- Insight and guidance from individuals with lived experience
- Shared stories from former foster youth on the benefits of collaborative relationship between birth and foster parents

CW360°

a comprehensive look at a prevalent child welfare issue

Supporting Collaborative Birth and Foster Parent Relationships in Child Welfare. Summer 2022

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