

Promoting Reunification as a Foster Parent

As a foster parent, your role goes beyond supporting the children in your care—it extends to supporting their families as a whole. Collaborative partnerships between foster caregivers and a child’s family can help promote timely reunification, improve family engagement, build protective capacities in parents or caregivers, and strengthen child safety and well-being.

Child Welfare Information Gateway conducted a series of interviews with birth and foster parents—many of whom are with either the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) or the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP)—to help dispel some of the myths each may hold about the other. This factsheet shares their thoughts and advice and highlights partnership opportunities. Interviewees’ names have been changed to protect their identities.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Building relationships from the start

Partnering with your caseworker and agency

Keeping an open mind and an open heart

Maintaining contact after reunification or other permanency

Conclusion

Additional resources

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE START

Building connections with a child's birth parents and keeping communication open and honest from the start can help establish a strong and ongoing partnership. Everyone benefits when family members, children, and foster caregivers collaborate effectively and actively support the reunification process.

Foster caregivers should adopt a strengths-based perspective, recognizing and building upon parents' existing support networks, such as extended family members, community connections, cultural groups, and friends. Parents who feel supported by foster caregivers and their existing networks will have more resources to help them build on their strengths and resilience. These parents are better equipped to provide their children with the love and connections essential for healthy development.

One strategy to begin a collaborative relationship between birth parents and foster caregivers is through ["icebreaker meetings."](#) Icebreaker meetings are facilitated conversations designed to introduce parents and caregivers and share information about the child. The conversation centers around the child's needs, routines, likes, dislikes, and any special considerations such as the child's medical history, family dynamics, communication expectations, and contact arrangements. Icebreaker meetings also provide foster caregivers with an opportunity to share more about themselves, their family, and their home. While icebreaker meetings alone do not create a collaborative relationship, they are a good first step.

These resources offer additional tips to help build and sustain relationships between birth families and foster caregivers:

- [Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide](#)
- [How Foster and Birth Parents Can Work Together Toward Reunification](#)

COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN

Unless contact is not allowed, foster caregivers should meet members of the child's family as early as possible—even on the initial day of placement—to exchange essential information about the child and to help ease any worries while their child is in foster care. Imagine how you would feel if you were in the parents' shoes and think about what you would want to know about the people caring for your child.

The case plan may determine the nature and frequency of contact with the child's family. When permitted, regular check-ins through emails, phone calls, texts, photo sharing, etc., can help birth parents and other family members feel closer to their children, build trust with you, and encourage reunification. Keeping in touch with family is also important for children as it helps them maintain their sense of [identity, belonging, and stability](#); minimizes feelings of [grief and loss](#) due to separation; preserves [connections to their background](#); and can contribute to better [well-being outcomes](#).

"There should be an initial meeting to introduce the foster [caregiver] and the birth parents so they can ask the little questions. What is your child like? What are their sleeping hours? What are their dislikes? This can be a great opportunity for [birth parents] to see that the foster caregiver is really concerned about their child and doesn't want to replace them. It lets them know right off the bat that you are on their side."—Keely, foster parent, BFPP

"Before she even came to our home, I had the opportunity to speak with her mother on the phone to start building a relationship. She was able to ask me questions about my family. Looking back on it, I think that was pivotal to her feeling comfortable with the placement."—Beth, foster parent, BFPP

"I wish my extended family had been more involved when I was in care, and I wish there had been more conversations with caseworkers about my [noncustodial father]. I would have been so much more grounded and connected if I had been allowed to maintain these relationships."
—Jeri, a young adult who experienced several foster care placements

SUPPORTING FAMILY TIME AND CONNECTIONS

Maintaining connections with family members is important for a child's overall well-being, as these connections can positively impact a child's emotional and psychological development. Spending time with relatives and learning about their family's history and traditions helps maintain cultural bonds and strengthen their identity.

Frequent and regular interactions between the child and birth parents or other family members, also known as "family time," help to maintain bonds and hope. Through consistent family time, birth parents can continue to improve their relationships with the child while preparing for reunification. Children who have regular, meaningful visits with their parents are [more likely](#) to reunite with them. Adjusting your schedule to allow children to have regular visits with parents and relatives helps maintain family connections. Supporting consistent family time is an important part of foster caregivers' partnership with birth parents or other caregivers.

The following resource offers more information about the importance of family time:

- [Before and After Visitation: 5 Tips to Help Children in Foster Care](#)

PARTNERING WITH YOUR CASEWORKER AND AGENCY

Your caseworker can help you go beyond simply "checking the boxes" of a case plan to actively partner toward reunification by promoting positive relationships with the child's birth parents and other family members. Through collaboration with your caseworker, children and families can be better connected to the services they need to reach their goals.

Caseworkers play a crucial role in helping birth parents, family members, and foster caregivers get to know one another. As a foster parent, actively engaging with the child's family and caseworker through regular meetings, updates, and open dialogue creates transparency that builds trust among everyone in the child's life.

For additional support, your agency may connect you with a peer support group led by experienced foster caregivers or with liaisons who can help you access relevant training and answer any questions you may have. They can provide additional support and guide you through any issues. Beyond agency resources, local community groups, faith-based organizations, and nonprofits often provide valuable support and relief. Don't hesitate to ask what resources are available in your community to support you.

"The system has a lot they can do to support relationships [between birth parents and foster caregivers]. We need to find ways to be together from the very beginning as people supporting children and families. From the very beginning, I think that should be the goal. Whoever is responsible for that relationship from the very first minute can make a difference with reunification."—Roberta, foster parent, BFPP

"My visit supervisor was amazing. One day she was like, 'This is ridiculous—you have never met the people caring for your child!' I said, 'No, never. I think they hate me.' She thought we should meet. [When we met] that foster parent could look at me and see that I was a loving mother. [This] allowed me to know [my child] was okay so I could work on what I needed to work on. I couldn't focus on anything until that happened."—Julie, birth parent, BPNN

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND AND AN OPEN HEART

How foster caregivers interact with the families they support can affect child and family well-being and chances for reunification. The points below reflect the importance of resisting the urge to judge.

CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM ALREADY HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS WHO LOVE THEM

The children in your care are not with you because their parents or primary caregivers don't love them. They are with you because their parents or primary caregivers are struggling with a specific problem or need. Parents may be dealing with substance use disorders, mental health issues, housing instability, domestic violence, or a variety of complex challenges. All parents and caregivers need help sometimes. Parents and caregivers with support, encouragement, and assistance from family, friends, and their communities are more likely to provide safe and healthy homes for their children.

When parents or caregivers face difficult circumstances, such as losing a job or being unable to feed their family, they need access to economic and concrete supports and services to help meet basic needs and minimize the stress caused by challenges and adversity. When parents or caregivers lack support or feel isolated, they may be more likely to make poor decisions that can lead to neglect or abuse. Families experiencing poverty who may be unable to provide for their children are more likely to be reported for child neglect, but poverty does not inherently equal neglect. Foster caregivers should understand how conditions of poverty impact families and learn that experiencing poverty does not constitute neglect.

"The most dangerous thing I see is that black and white thinking of foster and adoptive parents 'saving' kids. These children are not orphans. They have families."—Amy, foster parent, BFPP

"One of my huge pet peeves is the language they use to recruit foster parents: 'These children just need some love.' These children already have love. They already have parents."—Roberta, foster parent, BFPP

"Know that [birth parents] want the best. They love their kids just like you love yours."—Sandra, birth parent, BPNN

MISTAKES DO NOT DEFINE A FAMILY

As a foster parent, you play a vital role in supporting children and their families on their path to healing and reconciliation. Understanding that individuals are more than the sum of their mistakes or behaviors helps to create a foundation for meaningful change. Parents can develop new skills and healthier relationships with proper support and intervention. It's also important to recognize that courts only rule against providing family reunification services under certain circumstances—specifically when substantial evidence demonstrates that such efforts would compromise a child's safety and well-being. In most cases, the goal is to reunify the child and family.

"The incident between his mother and me was not only isolated but inflated with alcohol and drugs. That was not the [norm] for us."

—Robert, birth parent, BPNN

"[Foster parents] should know the way a birth parent feels. [Birth parents] are already so ashamed of themselves. They already feel like the most awful parent in the world, and they've made a lot of mistakes. Just treating them like a human and saying, 'You've done a great job' or 'Your kids have a really great bond with you' or 'They love you a lot' is really groundbreaking."

—Julie, birth parent, BFPP

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

Every child's journey into foster care has a complex backstory. The circumstances that lead to child welfare system involvement often have multiple layers and perspectives that may not be immediately apparent. What you observe as a foster parent might represent only one side of a complicated situation. To gain deeper insight into the birth parent experience within the child welfare system, consider viewing the video, ["An Interview With Birth Parents."](#) Hearing directly from those who have navigated this journey can provide valuable insight that will enrich your understanding as a foster parent.

"I don't know who [the foster mother] thought I was. Obviously, she didn't think very highly of me because of the way that she was relating to me. Who was telling her who I was? Who we are as a family? Who my kid was? Who his brother was? Not only had my son never been away from me, he had never been away from his brother."—Sandra, birth parent, BPNN

"When I came to the [BFPP] conference and heard [birth parents] say what they thought of foster parents, I wanted to stand on the table and say, 'No! I'm not standing in judgment of you. I'm definitely not trying to turn your child against you!'"—Keely, foster parent, BFPP

SUPPORT, TRUST, AND EMPATHY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

When parents temporarily lose custody of their children, it can result in feelings of grief, anger, shame, and guilt, creating an emotional rollercoaster for birth parents. By imagining yourself in their position, you can begin to understand their experience. Ask yourself: How would I feel if my child was removed from my home and placed in foster care? What emotions would overwhelm me? What support would I need? Acknowledging the complex emotions birth parents face allows you to better support the entire family, ultimately benefiting the child in your care.

"It would have been helpful if someone at the hospital had asked me if there was anything I needed, because I was desperate for change. Instead, there was no engagement and instead punitive words. It was the darkest time of my life. I needed someone to believe in me."—Nancy, birth parent, BPNN

"I think empathy and compassion are key. If a [birth] parent read their bio to the foster parent, I think they would immediately have compassion."
—Julie, birth parent, BFPP

MAINTAINING CONTACT AFTER REUNIFICATION OR OTHER PERMANENCY

The relationship between foster caregivers and a child's family doesn't have to end when reunification or another permanency option has been achieved. When these relationships continue, they create valuable social connections that enhance children and families' sense of stability and belonging. These ongoing partnerships can serve as an extended support system, providing families with someone to call for encouragement during difficult moments or brief respite when needed. Such sustained connections often strengthen family resilience and can help prevent future child welfare involvement.

These resources share additional information about the benefits of maintaining contact after reunification:

- [Benefits of Staying Connected With A Foster Child After Reunification](#)
- [Maintaining Relationships With Foster Youth After Returning Home](#)

"We see a lot of kids who have lived with us at different times and their families. [With one] child we had at one point, his grandmother still calls us, and we do all the babysitting whenever she needs help. We have another young adult who went back to her family, and she calls us almost every weekend. She had a baby, and we're the godparents."

—Ellen, foster parent, BFPP

"One of the outcomes [of a birth-foster parent partnership] where maybe a baby is not going to go home is that it allows that child to keep everybody important in its life. On the flip side, where the babies have gone home, the birth mom can still call upon the foster caregivers for occasional help. They're actually working together to raise these children."—Julie, birth parent, BFPP

"Just last week a birth mom we had worked with reached out to me and asked if we could talk. She was very honest with me about some stress she was experiencing and just needed to talk to somebody before she found a support group. I was deeply honored that she trusted me enough to be that person she called in that moment."—Beth, foster parent, BFPP

CONCLUSION

As a foster parent, you are uniquely positioned to positively impact the lives of children and their families by supporting efforts toward reunification. Establishing and sustaining relationships with a child's birth parents and other family members can help promote timely reunification, improve family engagement, build protective capacities in parents or caregivers, and strengthen child safety and well-being. Remember, partnerships between foster caregivers and birth families can continue after families have been reunified or another permanency option has been achieved. This ongoing relationship can help increase important social connections and support for children and their family members.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The [Birth and Foster Parent Partnership](#) (BFPP) supports birth parents working together with foster parents and kin caregivers to strengthen families and promote reunification. BFPP is a partnership of the Children's Trust Fund Alliance (Alliance), the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs.

The Alliance's [Birth Parent National Network](#) (BPNN) promotes and champions birth parents as leaders and strategic partners in prevention and child welfare system reform.

[Parents Anonymous](#) uses mutual support and shared leadership to empower, inspire, and create long-term positive change.

The Youth Law Center's [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) seeks to define and raise expectations for foster care, recruit and retain quality foster caregivers, and give caregivers a voice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

This product was developed with the assistance of BFPP.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2025). Promoting reunification as a foster parent. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/partnering-birth-parents-promote-reunification/>



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



This material may be freely reproduced and distributed. However, when doing so, please credit Child Welfare Information Gateway. This publication is available online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/partnering-birth-parents-promote-reunification/>.