



Foster Families WORKING WITH Birth Families TO HELP MOVE CHILDREN TO TIMELY Permanency

by **Jane Elmore**



What is the goal of foster families working with birth families?

Permanency for the children as soon as possible. Working cooperatively with birth families can speed the process of permanency, not just for reunification, but for adoption as well. When foster families and birth families are working with the caseworker as part of a team to do what is best for the children, they have a common goal. The foster family is helping the birth family to be reunited with their children. If the birth family believes that everyone is helping them, but they can't be reunited with their children, it becomes easier for them to participate in making other permanency plans. Ideally, birth parents will be able to participate in developing a permanency plan for their child that includes surrendering their children for adoption, rather than going to court to terminate the parental rights.

The adults manage the relationships.

When the foster parents, birth parents, and caseworker don't work together, the child ends up in the middle "managing the relationships" between the adults. Think about the child who knows

his birth parents and foster parents dislike each other, and maybe the caseworker doesn't like either one of them. The child must monitor what he says to any of them about any of the rest of them! What an untenable position to place any child in, but especially a child that has all the problems already forced on him by virtue of being a part of the child welfare system.

If the adults work together with a strong sense of purpose to do what is best for the child - the child sees this, and he doesn't have the pressure of trying to manage the adults. The adults are in charge and they manage the relationships with the child, the foster family, the birth family, and the caseworker. Everyone wins, especially the child.

Is this approach for ALL foster families & birth families?

A decision must be made if this approach is to be used with every family whose children come into care, or if it will only be used with families that are open to the approach and can make good use of the added time and expertise of the foster parents.

A similar decision needs to take place regarding foster parents. Will all foster

parents be required to work extensively with birth parents? What about foster parents who just want to adopt? Will foster parents who provide these extra supports be compensated for their time, as opposed to just being reimbursed for expenses? Will foster parents participating in this program be considered "professional foster parents," and be given special recognition, etc?

What does foster families working with birth families mean?

Denise Goodman talks about "Bridging the Gap." (See bibliography for contact information.) She has created a chart that demonstrates a continuum of behaviors. It can include indirect contact such as sending the child's report card with her and providing snacks on visits, to the birth family and foster family joining together to celebrate birthdays and holidays with the child. It can be a whole range of little things and big things that will change over time as the relationship develops. Sometimes foster parents even become advocates for the birth family.

What may be most heartwarming for the foster parents who do this work is the appreciation of the children in their care.

When the foster parents go out of their way to be nice to their birth parents it means a lot to the child. Brenda Weber, a foster parent from Minnesota, who works with the National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption, talks about one little boy she fostered thanking her “for being nice to my mom”.

The ultimate example of foster parents working with the birth parents is what is called “Shared Family Care.” It is when the birth family actually moves in with the foster family. The foster family mentors the birth family on everything from parenting to budgeting to meal preparation to apartment hunting to any number of other things. The birth family maintains responsibility for their children. Typically the birth family lives with the foster family for 3 to 6 months and the foster family continues to mentor the family after they move out and are living on their own. Birth families, foster families, and the caseworker working as a team is hard work for everyone.

The foster family may feel frightened, anxious and judgmental. The birth family may feel suspicious and resentful. The staff may feel threatened and fear they will lose “control” of the case.

How do we move all of these negative feelings to a positive, working relationship? How do we get birth parents, foster families, and the caseworker to focus on what is best for the child?



Keys to Success

MUTUAL RESPECT
from everyone to everyone.

KNOWLEDGEABLE & EXPERIENCED
caseworker.

OPEN DECISION MAKING.
Both birth parents and foster parents stressed that there should be no “premeetings where the real decisions are made.”

FOSTER PARENTS
are REALLY part of the team and all information is shared with them.

BIRTH FAMILIES
do not feel judged.

PROGRAMS ARE
INTENSE AND SHORT TERM,
generally 6 months or less.

NEEDED SERVICES
are in place.

Training Can Make It Happen!

What kind of training? The amount and kind of training to be developed depends on how intensively you want the families to work together, and current practice.

Derith McGann, Director of Foster and Adoption Services for Connecticut, who has been recognized for her work with foster families says “agencies need to decide if foster parents are really part of the team, or are they just contracted providers who should do as we say.” For many states, having foster parents work with birth parents in a significant way will be a major transition for staff and foster parents. This needs to be respected and addressed.

The approach of foster parents working with birth parents should be integrated into both the initial and ongoing foster parent training, and the initial and ongoing staff and supervisor training. If necessary, develop specialized training for

already licensed foster parents and experienced staff. Train staff and foster parents together when possible.

Use foster parents, birth parents, and staff who have done this work successfully to assist with the training. Have them talk about how they came to be able to do this work and the value of it. Also ask those who have made mistakes and have learned from those mistakes to talk about their mistakes and what they could have done differently.

Have staff who have done this work successfully available to counsel and mentor other staff new to this approach. It is important for caseworkers to be comfortable and supportive of the relationships between foster parents and birth parents as they develop. They must be able to provide assistance when there are the inevitable rough patches along the way.

Ensure everyone understands that the goal is to move children to permanency more quickly; not just reunification, but adoption as well. Stress the positive impact on the child of everyone working together.

Training Should Include:

- ♦ Why children come into care. Include actual data from the agency as well as a discussion about the causal factors of children being abused and neglected. This will lead to the other discussion points below.
- ♦ Developing empathy with the life situations that brought birth parents to the point that they have abused and neglected their children. This includes everything from the birth parents own experiences of being parented, to the role played by addictions and mental illness.
- ♦ How domestic violence is related to child abuse. Participants need to understand why women stay in violent relationships, and why they go back after they leave.

- ◆ Understanding alcohol and other drug abuse, including how to spot active drug use, and its impact on a parent's ability to parent. Also include prenatal drug abuse and its effect on the infant and developing child.
- ◆ Recognizing and appreciating the impact of mental health issues, as well as the importance of treatment and medication, and the role of heredity.
- ◆ The role of other professionals. This includes the children's and parent's therapists, the addictions treatment staff, the domestic violence staff, teachers, and others. Foster parents and staff need to understand how to best make use of the expertise of these other professionals as they work with the birth parents.
- ◆ Learning how to be non-judgmental. Both staff and foster parents need to be able to be supportive of birth parents.
- ◆ Explaining mentoring and how to do it in a way that will allow the birth parents to maintain their dignity.
- ◆ Understanding the birth parents' mixed feelings about having their children returned home. Talk about the role foster parents can play if the children are returned home, and how they can continue to mentor the birth parents.
- ◆ How to work together as a team. Determine the rules for communication, including what will be communicated. Thrash out what authority each team member has. Discuss how the team will learn to trust each other. Determine how problems and disagreements will be resolved.

Foster parents and staff must receive training if they are to do quality work with birth families and each other.

The First Meeting between Foster Parents, Birth Parents & Staff

This meeting is important. It is the first step in the development of these relationships. Both the Oregon Dept of Human Services and the Michigan Family Independence Agency have created excellent materials to guide their staff, foster parents and birth parents through these meetings and beyond. (See bibliography for contact information.)

Hold the first meeting within a week of the child(ren) coming into care. Attendees include the birth parents, foster parents, and the caseworker. Including the child or children depends on their age and maturity, the issues that brought them into care, if they want to come, and the feelings of the rest of the invitees about them coming.

Make sure the time and location of the meeting works for everyone. The first sign of mutual respect is for the caseworker to set a time that is convenient for EVERYONE, not just the caseworker. This may mean an evening or a weekend meeting. It may mean the caseworker drives the farthest to the meeting. Frequently these first meetings are held in the office, which is fine if that is seen as a neutral location. The office may be very intimidating to the birth parents. Asking for their suggestions as to where to meet is a great way to show respect for them. Address everyone's transportation needs.

Set a time limit for the meetings of no longer than 30 minutes. A time limit keeps everyone focused and the anxiety down.

Develop an agenda and review it with each participant and review their role in the meeting. Stress that the meeting is to focus on how all of them, the foster parent, birth parent, and caseworker can work together to best meet the needs of the child.

Martha Proulx, Program Specialist for the Maine Bureau of Child and Family

Services, and President of the National Association of State Foster Care Managers stresses the importance of working with birth parents so that they clearly understand what is expected of them in working with the agency and foster parents. They must understand the roles of everyone and the appropriate boundaries. For example, that it is not appropriate to ask the foster parents for money, or to not follow the rules set by the agency regarding visits, etc.

Agenda for the Meeting:

The same general agenda will be used each time there is a "first meeting" between the foster parents, birth parents, and caseworker. The agenda needs to be very focused and child centered.

- ◆ Caseworker welcomes everyone and thanks them for coming. The rules of confidentiality are reviewed. Ground rules are discussed, such as treating everyone with respect, being honest, and that all decisions will be made openly.
- ◆ Caseworker invites the birth parents to talk about their children. This gives the birth parents the opportunity to share information with the foster family, such as the child's food likes and dislikes, bedtimes, favorite toys, etc.



- ◆ Foster parents can ask questions, and share information about their family.
- ◆ Close the meeting by insuring that immediate and practical matters such as visits with the parents, doctors' appointments, and counseling sessions are clarified.

You Are On Your Way!

Foster parents working with birth parents can be a positive experience for everyone, and is the most beneficial situation for the child. It will allow the child to move to permanency more quickly. It puts the adults, not the child, in the position of managing the relationships among the adults, and allows everyone to focus on meeting the best interests of the child.

References

"Icebreaker" brochure and associated materials. Oregon Dept. of Human Services. Carolyn Krohn at carolyn.krohn@state.or.us

"F.O.C.U.S. Meeting Training Agenda". Dawn Walker, Michigan Family Independence Agency at walkerd4@michigan.gov

"Tips on Promoting Birth Parent - Foster Parent Teams" from New York State Citizen's Coalition for Children, Inc. at www.nyscc.org/linkfamily/Realities/caseworkertip.htm

"Bridging the Gap Between Resource Families and Birth Families" by Denise Goodman at DAGPhD@aol.com

Dougherty, S. (2001) "Foster Parents as Mentor to Birth Parents," Toolbox No. 2, Expanding the Role of Foster Parents in Achieving Permanency. Washington, DC. Child Welfare League of America. Reprinted by special permission of the CWLA. <http://www.cwla.org>

"Shared Family Care" from The National Resource Center for Abandoned Infants Resource Center at <http://aia.berkeley.edu/projects/sfc/htm>



TOP 10 Reasons to Adopt a Teenager

1. No diapers to change.
2. We sleep through the night.
3. We will be ready to move out sooner . . . but we can still visit.
4. You don't just get a child, you get a friend.
5. We will keep you up to date with the latest fashions.
6. No more carpools - we can drive you places.
7. No bottles, formula or burp rags required.
8. We can help out around the house.
9. We can learn from you.
10. We will teach you how to run your computer!

Concept developed by the Oklahoma Youth Advisory Board, 2000