

## Engage Birth Families

The idea of rearing children in a connected family is typically seen when parenting is shared between divorced parents. In this context, parental sharing is seen as critical to the healthy development of children. This principal of connected family can also be applied to children in foster care. It is critical that this principal be applied when children first enter the system so that the groundwork for a healthy connection has already been developed before permanency is obtained.

The importance of promoting healthy attachments between children and their birth families cannot be overstated. There is an inherent biological bond between children and their birth parents. No matter how abused and/or neglected children are, they will still feel a bond with their parents. Sometimes this bond is very strong and the children will actually idealize their parents. Other times, the bond is weaker, but the children may still be interested in having some contact with their birth parents. It is imperative for foster/adoptive parents to recognize this bond and find ways to “honor” the attachment between children and their birth parents. Both of these feats can be difficult for foster/adoptive families if they are not prepared for this upfront and provided with the support and education to understand how to maintain these connections and how to handle issues that will inevitably arise. In order to provide this type of support, child welfare systems have to change their paradigm of thinking so that both birth families and foster/adoptive parents are seen as team players that provide key roles in meeting the needs of children in care.

Research indicates that strengthening the relationship between birth and foster/adoptive families from placement forward mitigates conflict between the families and lessens the tension that children may feel as a result of the dissonance. A healthy relationship between foster/adoptive families and birth families helps to minimize the trauma youth experience in foster care due to losing everything familiar to them. Maintaining these connections can be critical in helping parents move toward reunification. However, the connections can also increase the chance that birth families will support alternative permanency options

when reunification is not viable. Foster/adoptive families also benefit from these connections in that they gain a realistic sense of the children’s histories and become aware of extended family members who might be able to provide a support system and possibly serve as cultural guides for both the children and themselves.

In order to help foster/adoptive parents establish family connections with birth parents, agency leadership must see this as a critical component and make changes throughout the organization. Listed below are some specific changes that child welfare agencies can make to encourage and support this type of connection, starting when the children first enter care:

- Develop a module on working with children and their birth parents that is included in pre-service training. This module should help foster parents develop some empathy for the birth parents, understand the bond that inherently exists between children and their birth parents, understand the importance of children maintaining some level of contact, and identify concrete ways they can honor children’s attachment to their birth parents.
- Engage birth parents early in the case, and set up a process where birth parents can meet the foster parents, share critical information about the children and develop a plan for family connections. It is important for child welfare systems to be creative in developing these plans. The plans could range from something as intensive as going to church together or something as minimal as sending letters weekly. The level and intensity will depend on the risk factors, foster/adoptive parents’ comfort level, and the well-being of children.
- Ensure that birth parents are connected with adoptive parents long before permanency is obtained and that the child welfare agency is there to



provide structure and guidance throughout the process. This will lay a strong foundation for connections post permanency.

- Develop an agreement between the adoptive parents and birth parents prior to permanency being obtained that lays out the level of contact that will take place after finalization. The agreement should be as specific as possible and include children, when age appropriate, in the planning process.
- Help adoptive parents anticipate and plan for future involvement of the birth family. Even in cases where the birth parents are not known or connected with the children prior to permanency, there is a good chance that they will find each other at some point. Adoptive parents need to understand how social media works and have a plan in place for dealing with this situation when it arises.
- Develop a program in post-permanency services that helps families negotiate relationships throughout the adoption lifecycle. Although a solid plan may have been put in place prior to permanency, the level and frequency of contact may need to change based on the age of the children, the status of the birth parents, or changes that take place within adoptive families, etc.

Several states have developed practices for preparing foster families, staff, and sometimes birth families to engage in building relationships that support children in care which are listed below:

- **North Carolina:** <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-10/chg/CSs1201c11.pdf>
- **Wisconsin:** <http://wiadopt.org/Portals/WIAadopt/AdoptandPartners/PartnersSpring08.pdf>
- **Iowa:** [http://www.ifapa.org/pdf\\_docs/ResourceParentsPartneringWithBirthParents.pdf](http://www.ifapa.org/pdf_docs/ResourceParentsPartneringWithBirthParents.pdf)

Foster parents typically need help in renegotiating the rules of engagement with birth families as the definition of “parent” changes from biological parents to adoptive parents. Families will need support from the child welfare system in determining how open the adoption should be, what boundaries should be in place, and how to develop a contact agreement that will help to structure the relationship with birth parents once permanency is achieved. Several useful resources about how and why to build relationships with birth families are listed below:

- <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/BirthParentEngagement.pdf>
- [http://www.acwa.asn.au/conf2004/acwa2004papers/20\\_HONNER\\_EnduringRships.pdf](http://www.acwa.asn.au/conf2004/acwa2004papers/20_HONNER_EnduringRships.pdf)
- <http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fpv13n1/foster.htm>

**Open Adoption:** While challenging at times, often Open Adoption helps children answer questions that, when left unanswered, provoke anxiety and identity issues for adoptees. One article asks, “Would you want to grow up wondering why you *looked* like no one in your family? Or have some *health scare* pop up and not know if anyone in your family had something similar? Or feel guilty as a child or adult about hurting your adoptive family and wondering if they'd disown you for *searching* for your biological family? Or grow up with a feeling of *missing something* but not quite being able to put your finger on what that something might be? Or find out as an adult that your biological family members have *passed on* without you having a chance to know them?” The article’s answer to all these questions is “No!”  
<http://upsidedownworld.hubpages.com/hub/Open-Adoption-through-Foster-Care>

**Specific Consent:** Some states have developed formal legal processes that support biological parents in selecting an adoptive family for their children in care. These processes help birth parents recognize the relationship that develops between children and their foster parents and ultimately supports foster parents in adopting their children. This type of arrangement can alleviate children from having to display loyalty to one set of parents, which can be traumatizing, and helps children feel more comfortable moving forward with permanency. Adoption by consent typically results in connected families and open adoptions. Examples of programs that support birth-parent voluntary surrender and consent include the following:

- **Illinois’s** information explaining the process:  
<http://www.illinoislawyerfinder.com/articles/you-and-the-law/family/children/child-adopted-parental-consent>
- **Michigan’s** specific consent for adoption form:  
<http://courts.mi.gov/Administration/SCAO/Forms/courtforms/adoptions/pca308.pdf>
- **Hawaii’s** specific consent form:  
<http://www.courts.state.hi.us/docs/IFP/specccon.pdf>