

Set Expectations

Lorrie Lutz describes a triangle of support in child welfare that involves the birth families, resource families (foster parents), and child welfare agencies (Lutz, 2005). According to Lutz, these three entities have to build a strong relationship to prevent the “triangulation of the triangle of support around the child.” The triangulation occurs when any of the members of the triad, consciously or otherwise, create circumstances, planning and service delivery processes, or problem resolution strategies that in effect alienate another member. When this triad works well together, permanency efforts are bolstered, loyalty issues children in care often encounter are decreased, and retention of foster families increases.

The role of foster parents has changed. Whereas foster parents have historically been seen as temporary caregivers that provided room and board, they are now seen as critical players on the child welfare team. In their role on the child welfare team, foster parents have many responsibilities not only, the children in their care, but also to the agency and increasingly to the birth families. Although these roles have increased in practice, many child welfare systems still do not have clear visions of the foster parents’ role on the team, nor do they have consistent messaging about expectations. As a result, there is often confusion among both staff and foster parents, which can cause tension and impede progress for the children. A clearly delineated vision of the role of foster parents, including a set of expectations, helps with both recruitment and retention. It also helps to ensure all parties are working together to obtain permanency for the children.

Three large areas that the role of foster parents have changed are described below:

1. Involvement in Treatment

There has been an increase in knowledge regarding the impact of childhood trauma on the brain. It has become evident that ‘traditional parenting’ often does not work for children who have experienced early childhood trauma. Foster parents are expected to have a basic

understanding of trauma and how it impacts behaviors. Foster parents often have to learn a new parenting paradigm so that they can respond in a manner that will help children heal versus exasperate the situation. Often times, foster parents are asked to participate in therapy and utilize therapeutic interventions in their daily activities. Foster parents now play a key role in helping children to heal.

2. Involvement with Birth Families

The significance of engaging birth parents on a swift and regular basis is critical if children are to return home. Even if reunification is not likely, most children benefit from having some level of ongoing contact with their birth families. Foster parents are expected to play an increasingly larger role with birth families. This is evident in the foster parent definition on the Foster Care & Adoptive Community website: “As a foster parent you have many responsibilities to a number of individuals: the child placed in your home, the agency, the child’s biological family, the team and your own family” (*Foster Parent Responsibilities*, (n.d.). Many states have documentation that clearly list responsibilities that foster parents have to the children’s birth families. These responsibilities include everything from monitoring visits to mentoring birth parents.

3. Movement into a Permanent Role

When reunification is not possible, foster parents are often approached to become the permanency resources. In FY 2010, of the 53,000 children adopted, 53% were adopted by their foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). With a little over half of the children being adopted by their foster parents, it is critical that child welfare systems establish clear expectations regarding permanency for foster parents from the beginning.



Casey Family Programs conducted a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) in 2005 (as cited in Lorrie Lutz article, 2005) included teams from 22 states, counties, and tribes that came together to test strategies for system change that would improve the quality of recruitment and retention of resource families. Primary issues that were identified by foster parents included: (1) lack of support and responsiveness from child welfare agency; (2) lack of clarity around role and inclusion of resource families; and (3) lack of effective partnerships between resource families and birth families. Foster parents included in the BSC consistently stated that when they are strong partners with the child welfare system, have effective relationships with birth families, and are considered an integral part of the professional team, they are more satisfied and more likely to continue to care for children and support birth families (Lutz, 2005).

Child welfare systems need to assess their policies, practices, and statutes to ensure that the role of foster parents and the systems' expectations for them are clearly articulated. Additionally, child welfare staff need to clearly understand the role of foster parents on the child welfare team and how they should be engaged with team decision making.

Agency leadership must see foster parents as a critical component and make changes throughout the organization to reflect this priority. Listed below are some specific changes that child welfare agencies can make that elevate the roles of foster parents to appropriately match their increased expectations:

- ✓ **Set a clear policy and train case managers on what information can and should be shared with foster parents.** Workers in the Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative routinely stated that they were not clear what information could be shared (Lutz, 2005). It is critical to provide tools that remind case managers of the types of information that should be shared at each milestone. Systems should set up quality assurance checks to ensure that the appropriate information is being shared.
- ✓ **Set clear expectations for foster parents that are documented and dispersed throughout the system.** Foster parents should be informed of these expectations during pre-service training and reminded consistently. A good example of a pre-service training that incorporates foster parent roles and expectations can be found in a pre-service training developed by Family Services of Metro Orlando for Orange County Florida called Team Approach to Positive Parenting.

- Train all levels of staff on the expectations that have been established for foster parents so that there is a consistent message provided throughout the system.
- Encourage open communication so that foster families feel comfortable seeking clarification on their roles.

- ✓ **Train staff on how to forge and mediate relationships between foster families and birth families.** If foster families are expected to play an increased role in developing relationships with extended family members, facilitating visitations, and in some cases, mentoring birth families, staff need to be trained on how to make these connections and mediate issues when they arise.



Some states have started to utilize foster-parent coaches that can provide hands on assistance with these relationships and help foster families find a level of interaction that works for them and the children in their home.

- ✓ **Provide foster parents with the tools and knowledge that they need to adequately perform their roles.** This entails increased educational opportunities around trauma, working with birth families, and supporting ongoing contact with extended birth-family members. Agencies need to look at creative ways to offer this information, including webinars, coaching, mentoring, and training that is provided in the home.
- ✓ **Set clear policies and expectations on the inclusion of foster parents in case-planning activities.** If foster parents are a critical part of the team, then their schedules must be taken into consideration. Holding meetings at times and locations convenient for the foster parents is critical. Technology that enables participation via remote access should also be considered.
- ✓ **Establish a Foster Parent Bill of Rights and legislate it into law.** According to the National Foster Parent Association, 16 states have Foster Parent Bill of Rights, 10 of which are legislated into law. Common topics in this type of document include grievance procedures, foster parent role in decision making for children, notices required for

change in placement, and type of information that foster parents should receive about children placed in their homes. The National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) has a template that states can follow. The NFPA website also lists all of the states that have a bill of rights, most of which can be obtained from the state websites.

- ✓ **Ensure child welfare staff are familiar with the Foster Parent Bill of Rights in their state.** Having a bill of rights is not sufficient, staff at all levels need to be aware of the document and have a clear understanding of their rights. Commitment to adhere to the bill of rights must be exemplified from the top down. One way Illinois has helped to ensure staff are familiar with the bill of rights is by stating in the Code of Ethics for Child Welfare Professions that staff must know the foster, parent law.
- ✓ **Incorporate a team-based model that includes foster parents as key players.** Two models that do this are Lifelong Families and Shared Family Foster Care. Both models encourage social workers and foster families to reach out to birth families with the mentoring, community support, and services they need to reunify with their children, while simultaneously providing out-of-home care for children.
- ✓ **Provide counseling and supportive services to foster parents after children leave their home.** The dual role of nurturing children while at the same time supporting the birth families can be emotionally taxing, especially when children are reunified. Agencies must acknowledge the grief and loss that many foster parents encounter and ensure that they have adequate supports in place.

- ✓ **With the increased expectations, it is essential that child welfare systems rethink the role of foster parents and how they are engaged throughout the continuum of care.** Policies, procedures, and practices need to be consistent in defining these roles. Both foster parents and child welfare staff need to be fully apprised of the expectations so that all parties are aware of the part they play in helping children move toward a positive outcome.

References

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*National Resource Center for Adoption, Permanency Support and Preservation Model, 2014.
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