

## Section 10- Parenting Time

### a) Family Access Center

Parents can visit their children at the Family Access Center located at the 2117 Campus building. The Family Access Center will complete an intake with the family and the coordinator will assist the family in developing a parenting time plan.

### b) The Benefits of Family Time

Research has taught us that children who have regular visits with their parents have an increased likelihood of a successful reunification. Foster parents play a very important role in ensuring that visits occur as well as providing support to the child(ren) before and after a visit.

### c) How to Be a Great Foster Parent & When Foster Parents First Meet Birth Family

These articles were written by Carrie Craft, Guide for Adoption/Foster Care on About.com. Carrie gives some helpful hints on building relationships with birth parents, navigating the initial meeting with birth parents, and more.

### d) Ideas for Promoting a Relationship with Birth Parents

This list of items was compiled by a social worker in adoption. It also gives helpful hints on building relationships with birth parents, visitation, etc.

### e) Comfort Calls

Initial foster care phone calls, also referred to as “comfort calls,” are conversations between parents and caregivers of children in foster care to discuss efforts to ensure child well-being.



## Supervised Parenting Time

Family Access Center  
Supervised Parenting Times



- What** The center offers a safe and secure setting for children to maintain relationships with parents and other significant adults. Trained staff provide supervised parenting times, monitored parenting times and supervised exchanges.
- Who** Families experiencing safety or conflict concerns in need of a setting where they can safely exchange or spend time with their children.
- Why** Children need to maintain relationships with parents and other significant adults. Relationships can be disrupted through divorce, domestic violence, child maltreatment and other conflicts. Supervised parenting times and exchanges offer the opportunity to maintain these vital relationships and prevent children from being placed in the middle of conflicts.
- Outcome** Families will experience safe, conflict free parenting time and exchanges.
- Cost** Fees are determined according to an ability to pay basis. Victims of violence and referrals from Olmsted County Child and Family Services are not charged a fee.
- Contact** For more information or to schedule a parenting time call Family Service Rochester, 287-2010 or the Family Access Center at 328- 6589.



STRATEGY BRIEF

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How can frequent, quality family time **promote relationships and permanency?**

Family time is essential for healthy child development, especially for children in foster care, as it helps to maintain parent-child attachment, reduce a child's sense of abandonment, and preserve a sense of belonging as part of a family and community. Family time offers reassurance for children and their parents, opportunities to strengthen cultural and kinship connections, and motivation for parents to enroll in treatment or meet other permanency plan requirements. Although there is no generally accepted way to structure family time to optimize chances for reunification,<sup>1</sup> families that spend time together regularly have a [greater likelihood of timely reunification](#), and frequent family connections may also decrease depression, anxiety, and externalizing problem behaviors in children.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **A right, not a privilege**

Family time is [not a special or elective service](#), nor is it to be used as a bonus or reward; it is a [fundamental right](#) for all children and youth in foster care, and their families. There are very few instances in which family connections should be curtailed, restricted or terminated.<sup>4</sup> Even when parents are engaged in the process of alcohol and drug use treatment, family time should be supported. (See the Kentucky Safe Families in Recovery [Drug Testing White Paper](#), which asserts that a positive drug test should not be used to cancel time between parents and



casey family programs

# How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?

their children since this can be harmful to a child and affect bonding and attachment; and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' [Child and Family Visitation Best Practice Guide](#), which does not consider drug or alcohol use prior to family time a reason to cancel, but rather a reason to assess level of supervision, location, and family support needed.) Amidst natural disasters or public health emergencies, family connections are even more important to mitigate child and family stress, and agencies may need to use a [variety of creative approaches](#) to sustain family time, such as more frequent telephone and video calls, front lawn/front porch visits, and meetings in open parks or walking trails.

## Family time and connection, not visitation

While most agency policies, state laws, and court decisions have focused on family visits or visitation, [“family time” and “family connection”](#) are more appropriate terms and goals. “Visits” and “visitation” are terms more often associated with hospitals, prisons, treatment facilities, or other involuntary settings. Family time and family connection, on the other hand, reflect positive connotations and values, including that time spent with family members is fundamental.

Parent-child connections are [essential for a child's well-being](#) and, perhaps more so than any other intervention, [correlate with successful reunification](#). Research reveals that family time has a [number of additional benefits](#) for both children and their parents:

### FOR CHILDREN

- Supports parent-child attachment
- Eases the pain of separation for all
- Maintains and strengthens family relationships
- Reassures children that their parent(s) is/are ok and helps them to eliminate self-blame for placement
- Supports the family in dealing with changing relationships
- Supports a child's adjustment to the foster home
- Results in [shorter periods of time in foster care](#)



### FOR PARENTS

- Enhances parent motivation to change by providing reassurance that the parent-child relationship is important for a child's well-being
- Provides opportunities for parent(s) to learn and try new skills
- Enables the parent(s) to be active and current with the child's development, educational and medical needs, and community activities
- Provides opportunities for parent(s) to assess how the child is doing, and share information about how to meet the child's needs
- Assists in the assessment and decision-making process regarding parenting capacities and permanency goals





# How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?

Consequences for children and parent(s) who do not maintain regular, frequent family time include:

- [Deterioration of the parent-child relationship](#) and emotional detachment.
- [Loss of family and community connections](#), including family history, cultural information, siblings, relatives, friends, neighborhood organizations, school, and places of worship.
- [Increased time](#) spent in out-of-home care.
- Missed opportunities for parents to improve parent/child interactions and change parental behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

While family time is considered the heart of reunification, even when reunification is unlikely, parents, siblings, and extended family continue to be important in a child's life, and hence visits can and should continue regardless of permanency plan.

## Federal context

Creating meaningful plans for families to spend time together is in keeping with the [Adoption and Safe Families Act \(ASFA\)](#), which included provisions that encourage the participation of parents and other family members in case planning to preserve family connections. ASFA emphasized the need for family

visits to begin as soon as possible after removal, encouraged communication between birth and foster parents, shifted the focus of visits from monitoring parents to building their strengths, and recommended involving foster parents or parents with previous child welfare experience as visit mentors. More recently, the federal Children's Bureau issued an [Information Memorandum](#) further emphasizing the importance of family time by outlining the research, sharing examples of innovative programs, and offering recommendations to attorneys, judges, caseworkers, and child welfare leaders.

## Structuring family time

Although there is variation in how child protection agencies approach family time, typically the goal is to increase the number and length of family visits while reducing agency oversight until the family is ready for reunification. Several factors can enhance family time to accomplish this goal.

### First visit

Given the trauma that removal causes both children and their parents, it is important for family time to occur as soon as possible, ideally within 24 to 48 hours. The actual timing may depend on the parents' circumstances and safety factors. While



# How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?

## SUPPORTING FAMILY TIME IN WASHOE COUNTY, NEV.

First visits are scheduled as soon after removal as possible and occur at the county's [Family Engagement Center](#), a warm and inviting space for parents and children. The Center offers many opportunities for recreation and family activities, including cooking and enjoying meals in the dining room, and special rooms for infants, toddlers, and children needing a low-sensory environment.

Based on [Fostering Relationships](#), trained engagers initially meet with both birth and foster parents before family time to talk about how the children are doing, share information, prepare for the visit, and plan an ongoing family time schedule. Foster parents are trained and encouraged to support the family and be part of these family connections.

Source: Interview with Jesse Brown, Jesse Brown, Family Engagement Center, Washoe County, Nevada, on March 6, 2020

full assessments of parents and children may not be complete and a plan may not yet be in place, early family time can still occur safely and go a long way toward providing comfort to both children and parents.

### Location

Family time should occur in places that provide as homelike and familiar of a setting as possible, while also maintaining safety. The visiting space should

be comfortable, clean, relatively quiet, and include age-appropriate toys and activities. While many families meet in child protection agency offices, many jurisdictions are moving away from such sterile settings, instead hosting family time in the homes of birth parents, relatives, or foster parents, or at community centers, libraries, parks, or other neighborhood settings. Other jurisdictions use [family centers or visit houses](#), where families participate in routine daily activities, such as meal preparation. In **Providence, R.I.**, the [Families Together](#) program allows parents time with their children at the Providence Children's Museum where therapists guide families in having fun together with hands-on exhibits.

In rural areas where children are often placed far away from their families, or in cases where circumstances require a creative approach to making sure parents and children spend time together, [virtual family time](#) by video or phone can be a useful way to maintain connection.

### Frequency

Family time should occur as often as possible, especially at the outset. As family time continues, the age of the child is a significant factor in determining how often children should see their parents. Infants and young children may need short visits daily or every other day to maintain their connection with a parent; young children of school age may need slightly less frequent visits if they are able to connect with parents on the phone each day. And older school-aged children and teens may be able to go a few more days between visits, such that longer time with parents once or twice a week may work better.

Visit Coaching came out of the limitations of traditional, supervised visits. We started to think creatively — if visits were designed to meet children's needs, what would that look like?

— MARTY BEYER, PH.D.,  
VISIT COACHING DEVELOPER

# How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?

## Involving the right people

In recent years, many agencies have moved from strictly monitored visits, to quality family time that promotes bonding and improved parenting skills. Coaches, mentors, advocates, foster parents, and others may now play a role in family time visits and that role can, at times, extend beyond family reunification.

## Preparing for visits

Many family time programs include a preparation component to help parents get ready to spend time with their children. In some cases, specially trained visit coaches work with parents to set realistic expectations, suggest parenting strategies, and offer guidance on structuring the visit. In other cases, caseworkers or foster parents help to prepare parents.

## Visit coaches

Specially trained visit coaches can provide instruction and support to parents before, during, and after visits. In 2015, **San Diego County** used the Title IV-E waiver to initiate [Family Visit Coaching](#) (FVC) for families with complex needs, and is in the process of expanding the program countywide.<sup>6</sup> Visit coaches are trained to work with parents to prepare for visits, develop realistic expectations, and put the child's needs first. The visit coach is actively involved in each family time to build the parent's strengths and help focus the parent on meeting the child's needs. At the conclusion of each visit, coaches provide additional feedback, and the [transparency of the feedback process helps to build trust](#) between the parent and the coach. In a [recent](#)

Adapted from the [Safe Babies Court Team™ approach](#), [Cradle to Crayons](#) (C2C) in Maricopa County, Ariz., operates through centers that offer child-parent psychotherapy, trauma therapy, and Family Time Coaching. C2Cs' approach emphasizes valuing parents, supporting shared parenting by parents and foster parents, and understanding the unique needs of children in care, including how they experience trauma and how to intervene. Research by the Arizona State University Center for Child Well-Being found that Family Time Coaching was significantly associated with reunification, and trauma therapy in combination with Family Time Coaching, or Family Time Coaching in combination with resource coordination, had even higher correlations with reunification.

[evaluation](#) by the [National Council on Crime and Delinquency](#), 47% of the families that were referred to FVC and chose to participate in the program ultimately reunified, compared to 30% of the families that were referred but did not to participate. Parents who participated in the program also exhibited an improvement in parenting skills. To date, Visit Coaching/ Family Time Coaching training has been provided to child protection staff and private providers in 26 states.

[Strive](#)<sup>7</sup> is a five-week, evidence-informed, low-cost program developed by [Partners for Our Children](#) in which a visit navigator meets weekly with a parent to address a particular topic, provide training before the

We want parents to be successful in this space and time. And we want to instill hope by letting them know there are other parents who have been in their position and have gotten their kids back

— LAURA ORLANDO,  
DIRECTOR, PARTNERS FOR OUR CHILDREN

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visit, monitor and guide practice during the visit, and engage the parent in a debrief after the visit. A new topic is tackled each week, and there is a progression from connecting, through play and problem solving, to healing and celebrating.<sup>8</sup> Researchers drew on the experiences and feedback from parents involved with the child protection system to develop the program. While the initial version of Strive is for parents with children ages 0 to 8, researchers have developed the program for families with older children (9 to 14 years old). Initial results from a pilot of more than 100 families showed that Strive parents were more likely to show up for visits than parents not involved with Strive, and were generally enthusiastic about the program and their visit navigator. Future research will look at how Strive affects the quality of visits and other outcomes.

## Parent-child interactions during family time

What happens during family time depends on many factors, including the identified case goals, the age of the child, how long the visits have been happening, the location of the visit, and even the time of year. Case plans for parents to reunify with their children usually include a parenting skills component, so the interaction during the visit may be a chance for the parent to practice new ways to engage his or her child. Safety surveillance during visits is often unnecessary and, whenever possible, unsupervised visits or opportunities for the parent to accompany the foster parent on a visit to the child's doctor or a school event can further enhance the connection between parents and their children.

The [Joan Sherman Program for Resilient Children](#)<sup>9</sup> was developed by [SCAN \(Stop Child Abuse Now\)](#) and the [Devereux Center for Resilient Children](#) in late 2014.<sup>10</sup> This six-step supervised program focuses on increasing both the protective factors of children and the skills of the parent to reduce maltreatment risk. Parents receive coaching at the beginning of each family time session to help build their competency in four key areas: being positive, watching and describing, naming feelings, and being supportive. During family time, parents and

## ADVICE FROM FAMILIES WITH EXPERIENCE

In partnership with parents and frontline staff in New York City, [Rise Magazine](#) created a series of [handouts, videos, and posters](#) offering tips for supporting parents in supervised visits.

their children engage in one of 40 activities that can be adapted for the age of the child. A trained caseworker conducts an assessment at each visit, and parents complete a resiliency assessment of their child at baseline and every tenth visit. While maintaining safety remains paramount, staff at [Ireland Home Based Services](#) in southern Indiana credit the program with helping the agency move to a structured, hands-on coaching approach for family time. The program is currently gathering outcome data to [evaluate the impact](#) on child resiliency and parenting ability.

## Parent mentors

[Parents with child welfare experience](#) are in a unique position to serve as allies and mentors to parents whose children have been removed. These Parent Mentors have the shared experience of losing their children temporarily, but they are also able to tell the story of their own family reunification and how they accomplished it. A number of jurisdictions have hired parents who successfully navigated the child protection system and trained them to work as parent partners and advocates. In Ohio, this program is known as [HOPE \(Helping Ohio Parent Effectively\)](#) and is one of a number of parenting programs that match advocates with those in need.

## Caregiver involvement

Caregivers can help children [prepare for visits](#) and transition afterward. They may transport children to and from visits and, in some cases, monitor the visits or offer ongoing coaching or support. When [foster and birth parents work as parenting partners](#), both



# How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?

## COMFORT CALLS AND ICEBREAKERS

**Comfort calls** between birth and foster parents soon after children have been removed give birth parents the opportunity to share important information about their children, and foster parents the opportunity to offer reassurance about how their children will be cared for. **Icebreaker meetings** are face-to-face meetings between parents and foster parents fairly soon after children are removed, and they serve a similar purpose — building a partnership between birth parents and foster parents.

during and outside of visits, the benefits include more normalcy for children, sharing of information, easing of children's concerns about friction between foster and birth parents, and a greater chance for successful reunification.

[Fostering Relationships](#)<sup>11</sup> was adapted from the [Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up \(ABC\)](#), an evidenced-based home visiting intervention for caregivers of infants and young children who have experienced trauma. Parents work closely with a trained mentor (not the caseworker) to prepare for how their

young child may react during the visit and how to respond in a nurturing and sensitive manner. In addition, the mentor trains the foster parent in the principles and techniques of ABC, how to develop empathy for birth parents, and how to give compliments to birth parents during the visits that reinforce the parents' sensitive interactions with their children. Results from early research suggest that parents who experienced Fostering Relationships were more sensitive to their children and participated in more following-the-lead behavior during visits with their children than parents who had not been exposed to the program.

Like several jurisdictions around the country, [Clark County, Nev.](#),<sup>12</sup> introduced Fostering Relationships as part of its [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) to build healthy relationships between parents and children so that families can be reunified. In some cases, a bond grows between the adults, which allows the foster parents to continue to support the family after reunification. Clark County has also found that if the birth and foster parents are partnering successfully, the family can move to community visits more quickly and, ultimately, achieve faster reunification. Shorter time in care translates to less trauma for children and cost savings for the county.



# How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?

About six years ago, **Ventura County, Calif.**,<sup>13</sup> moved from a traditional one-size-fits-all supervised visits setup to the current family time program. The introduction of [Safety Organized Practice](#) and the [California Child Welfare Core Practice Model](#) helped the county incorporate the voices of parents and children into safety planning. Building a safety network around the family that drew on natural support became a goal, and this carried over into family time. Visit tools were introduced, such as automatic reviews every three weeks to determine whether visiting could be liberalized

to allow families less supervision. Foster families or other members of the family's safety network partnered with parents and were often involved in monitoring visits, which provided opportunities more visits in natural settings. These partnerships also gave parents the chance to observe and learn about parenting skills. In some cases, the partnerships continued after reunification, so that the family had continued support. Ventura County has noted an increase in family preservation and a drop in the numbers of children in care since this shift in practice.

- 1 Fanshel, D. (1975). Parental visiting of children in foster care: Key to discharge? *Social Service Review*, 49(4), 493-514.
- 2 McWey, L. M., Acock, A., & Porter, B. E. (2010). The impact of continued contact with biological parents upon the mental health of children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(10), 1338-1345.
- 3 Cantos, A. L., Gries, L. T., & Slis, V. (1997). Behavioral correlates of parental visiting during family foster care. *Child welfare*, 76(2), 309.
- 4 For example, in cases of intra-familial sexual abuse, Munchausen syndrome by proxy, significant domestic violence, etc., where a clinical expert has determined that even high supervised family time would be contrary to a child's psychological or physical safety and well-being.
- 5 Burry, C. L., & Wright, L. (2006). Facilitating visitation for infants with prenatal substance exposure. *Child welfare*, 85(6), 899.
- 6 Interview with Marty Beyer, Visit Coaching Developer, and Jorge Cabrera, Casey Family Programs, March 9, 2020.
- 7 Interview with Susan Barkan and Laura Orlando, University of Washington Strive program, February 3, 2020.
- 8 Orlando, L., Barkan, S., & Brennan, K. (2019). Designing an evidence-based intervention for parents involved with child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 105. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104429>
- 9 Interview with Mandi Barger and Nick Miller, Ireland Home-Based Services on February 3, 2020.
- 10 Tobin Smith, G., Shapiro, V. B., Sperry, R. W., & LeBuffe, P. A. (2014). A strengths-based approach to supervised visitation in child welfare. *Child Care in Practice*, 20(1), 98-119. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2013.847056>.
- 11 Interview with Caroline KP Roben, University of Delaware, February 4, 2020.
- 12 Interview with Julie Abston and Denise Parker, Clark County, Nev., March 5, 2020.
- 13 Interview with Michelle Calder, Ventura County, Calif., March 12, 2020.

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## **How to Be a Great Foster Parent**

### **Week 2: Great Foster Parents Work with Birth Family to Aid Reunification**

**By Carrie Craft, About.com Guide**

#### **The First Goals of Foster Care Placements Are Often Reunification and Permanency**

Family reunification is all about helping a child rejoin his birth family, whether that's birth mom and birth dad or other members of the family, like grandparents. Sometimes foster parents help a child reconnect with other important people from the child's background, which is often called 'informal care' or 'kinship.' This could be a teacher at school or someone else from the community. The ultimate goal in all of this is for the child to achieve permanency, the knowledge that he will not have to move again.

Permanency is about having a forever home and that sometimes means adoption, if the birth family is unable to make the needed changes to ensure a safe environment for a child.

- As foster parents, we help the child maintain attachments and connections that already exist.
- Help strengthen bonds with birth family or the foster family. (Because if a child can attach to you, he can attach to anyone.)
- Create new connections with those who plan to parent the child, like an adoptive family or an 'informal care' placement.

#### **Mentoring Raises a Birth Family's Chance of Being Successful**

We all need someone to look up to. I know I always hug and kiss my child goodnight, because that is what my parents did for me. Some birth parents do not know how to tuck their child in at night or how to read a story to their children, complete with silly voices. That was my mom's specialty.

How can we as foster parents mentor birth family, especially when there may still be some hurt, anger and denial? It may be easier than you think. Your weekly presence and example may be all that's needed to make a difference.

Ideas include:

- Remember school papers and take them to visits so that the child can show birthmom or birthdad.
- Talk to the birth family about the child. Ask about fears, allergies, and how they usually do in school. What a great way to empower the birth family and acknowledge that they are the expert on their child. Even if you don't agree with their assessment, the act of asking may mean a lot to some birth parents.
- Bring items to visits that celebrate and mark the child's growth and development. This may include artwork, school pictures, and other craft items.
- When appropriate according to the team, invite birth parents to attend different meetings and appointments with you. Remember parent teacher meetings and doctor appointments can be great mentoring opportunities.
- Work on child development milestones with the birth parents. This may include potty training, first steps, or even working on math facts with older children.
- Discipline techniques can be gained when the birth parents watch how you interact with the child. I've had a birth mother talk to me about how she handled an argument during a visit with her sons, then ask me if she handled it properly. Showing that you're open for communication may open doors.
- Pack a meal or snack for a visit. This allows the birth family to see what you have brought to share.

It sometimes is difficult, especially when we know how a birth parent may have abused or neglected a child we have grown to love. Consider focusing on hating the act and not the person. In many cases the birth parents were abused and neglected too.

Of course, each case is different so it is important to ask the social worker overseeing the case if it would be appropriate to step up your mentoring of the family or back off. The worker may have ideas on what the birth family needs to work on before reunification can occur.

#### **Transitioning a Child Back Home or into an Adoptive Placement**

As foster parents we can help a child reunify with birth family or transition into an adoptive home. Here are some ideas to help with that process.

- Speak positive words about the upcoming move in front of the child. Look for strengths in the birth family or adoptive home. If you are struggling with the move, be sure to share your concerns or take your venting time out with friends and away from the foster child's ears.
- Add pictures of the child's family in their bedroom.
- Create a lifebook for the child, and keep it updated, especially before the move.
- Keep the foster child and the birth parents informed on the details of the transition. If transitioning into an adoptive home, keep the adoptive family in the loop as well.
- Make sure all are informed on how the child is doing with the upcoming move.
- If possible, advocate for a slow and steady transition that involves a few short visits and a few weekend visits, before the actual move date.
- Participate in foster care team meetings.
- Remember to celebrate the child's time in your home with a party or special outing.

### **This Week's Assignment: A bit of Reading and Reflecting**

#### **Reading**

Read our article on how to handle first meeting birth family. I can think of few other occasions when a foster parent, especially a new foster parent, is the most stressed. Also read, *Fostering Connections with the Whole Family*.

#### **Reflecting**

Spend some time reflecting on how you typically interact with birth family. Start now with a promise to yourself that you are not going to say negative things about your foster child's birth family, or adoptive family, especially within hearing of the child.

Make a plan, how are you going to extend a mentoring relationship? Evaluate if it's appropriate to do so at this time.

If you meet with some resistance from the birth family, continue to be respectful and silently teaching with your presence. It doesn't have to be a "in your face" formal teaching moment. A great example says a lot.

You're off to a great start toward being a great foster parent!

Make a plan, how are you going to extend a mentoring relationship? Evaluate if it's appropriate to do so at this time.



# When Foster Parents First Meet Birth Family

## Fostering Connections with Birth Family

### By Carrie Craft, About.com Guide

Your foster child has moved in, is settled into his room, and learning your home rules. Now comes the time that many foster parents worry the most about - meeting the child's birth parents. For the sake of all concerned, it is very important for the foster parents and the child's birth parents to form a working relationship. This relationship will help everyone involved on the team to work the family back together. The team is usually made up of you (the foster parent), the birth parents, the social workers, the therapists, and other workers. The reunification of the family is almost always the primary goal.

#### **First Steps**

- **Be on time.**  
Always have the children at their visits or planning/case meetings on time. Do not short the parent's visit time with your lateness.
- **Ask questions.**  
That child's parents know them better than anyone, and almost everyone likes to talk about their kids. Questions to ask could include:
  - Health Questions: Is the child allergic to anything? Has he had the Chicken Pox?
  - What are some of the child's favorite foods?
  - What are some of the child's favorite things?
  - What are some of the child's fears?By asking them about their child, you will begin to form an important relationship between the parents and yourself.
- **Remember to trust your instincts.**  
If the parents don't seem open to communication with you at this time, don't push it. They are dealing with a lot of stress and worry. Over time, you and the parents will have many more opportunities to meet and to hopefully form a working relationship. I'm not advocating that your first meeting with the parents should be a quiz either! The questions listed here are conversation starters, and a helpful way to get to know the child and his parents better.
- **Tell them about you and your family.**  
Don't be afraid to introduce yourself. Allow them time to ask you questions. But, be prepared for rudeness, anger, and distance. Remember that they have just been through a traumatic time in their lives with the removal of their children. Be respectful of that, no matter what the reason for the child's removal. (Warning: That last one is really tough when dealing with extreme abuse.)
- **Ask About Educational Needs.**  
If you have any school forms that need to be signed by the parents (or the social worker), be sure to have them with you. Any questions that you may have regarding school should be prepared in advance.
  - Ask which schools the child went to in the past, so that the current school can retrieve the child's information.
  - Ask what range of grades the child usually brings home, and in which subjects.

Once the child starts bringing home school papers, take a few to show the parents. I know I love to see my children's school work. If the school isn't sending grade cards to the parents, be sure to bring them to meetings or visits.

- **Prepare the Children** Have the child prepared for the visit. Some points to consider.
  - Will the visit take place during dinner? If so, is it your responsibility or the parent's to make sure that the child is fed? Sometimes the case workers like for the parents to provide dinner, so check on this. Nothing would be worse than a child that is grumpy due to hunger. This is not fair to the parents or the child.
  - Gently pre-teach the child about how the visits will happen. Detail where you are meeting her parents, how long the visit will last, and that there will be time to say "good-bye" until next time.
  - Consider buying a calendar and placing stickers or circling days of future visits. But each child is different. Some children will thrive with this information, while others will stew and worry.

- **If you need information ask someone else.**

If the birth parents are not open to speaking with you, then check with the social workers for any answers you are lacking regarding educational needs, visit concerns, or other matters.

- **Be kind and professional.**

Above all, the best bet in forming a connection with the child's parents is through the use of kindness and understanding. Leave judging to the courts.

**About the author, Carrie Craft:**

*Carrie has worked professionally in the field of adoption/foster care since 1996. She has a wealth of experience in adoption and foster care, both personally and professionally. She is a freelance writer, an adoptive mother, a foster mother and has experienced a successful adoption reunion. Several years ago, after the death of her mother, Carrie discovered that her mother had had a child before her and had placed the infant for adoption. Carrie has since met her sister and has built a relationship with her*

**Experience:**

*Carrie worked at the Wichita Children's Home, then, began fostering in 1997 in response to the need for more foster parents. Over the past ten years, Carrie and her husband have provided foster care for 40 children in police protective custody, long term, short term, and respite placements. Carrie is an adoptive parent, with three adopted sons, as well as a foster parent. Carrie and her husband are also the parents to one birth daughter.*

*Carrie holds certifications in several training curriculum. She trains others to be foster/adoptive parents and also creates customized curriculum on a variety of subjects related to adoption and foster care. Local, state, and national organizations have contracted with Carrie to train foster/adoptive parents, in face-to-face trainings as well as on-line classes, on various issues that affect their families and the children they parent. Carrie has been the Guide for Adoption / Foster Care on About.com since 2004.*

**Education:**

*Carrie holds a B.A. degree in Education from Wichita State University. She attends numerous trainings on a wide variety of subjects related to foster care, adoption, and parenting. Through her education, professional training, and personal experience, Carrie has developed an understanding of the needs and concerns of fostering and adoptive families.*

**From Carrie Craft:**

*I hope that the About: Adoption / Foster Care Web site helps others learn about all aspects of adoption and foster care and provides support for all of those whose own lives have been impacted by adoption and/or foster care. I want the About: Adoption / Foster Care Web site to provide factual information, a variety of perspectives, news, resources, and a supportive community for all who visit.*

- *About.com Adoption & Foster Care*

## **Ideas for Promoting a Relationship with Birth Parents**

**Compiled by: Jodi Raehsler, Social Worker, Adoption**

- Take and pick up the child from visits as often as possible. Meet face to face.
- Talk about the child's likes and dislikes, daily activities, favorite foods, routines, etc.
- Exchange photographs, gifts, etc.
  - Allow the birth parents to give gifts to the child.
  - Give the birth parents photographs, artwork, schoolwork or allow the child to give these items to his/her parents.
  - If the child is not old enough, help him/her color a picture, etc for his/her parents.
  - Assemble a book of photos or a life book together.
- Write letters and send photographs if there is no direct contact between the child and his/her birth parents. The birth parent may not be allowed to visit the child or the birth parent cannot or does not visit the child.
- Go to doctor/therapy appointments together. Give the birth parents updates if they cannot attend an appointment.
- Dress young children in clothing provided or selected by the birth parent.
- Always get the birth parents' permission for haircuts, piercings, etc.
- Refer to the birth parents as mom and dad and yourself as foster mom and dad.
- Do not change the child's given name. Respect the name given to the child by his/her birth parents. Ask if the child's name has special meaning. For example, was the child named after a family member or a friend?
- Always recognize the birth parents as the child's parents. Let the birth parent know that you do.
- Find common interests and experiences.
- Be honest, respectful and kind regardless of how you feel about the birth parents and what they did.
- Understand that the birth parent may have been a victim of abuse and neglect, as a child and/or an adult. Recognize that they have also experienced trauma.
- Believe that the birth parents are people who are capable of change.
- Make an effort to identify the birth parents' strengths. Most likely, many people already pointed out there problems and weaknesses. Think about how the birth parents will feel when you affirm something positive about them or their relationship with their child.
- Recognize that the bond that the child has with his/her birth parents is so important that is worth working to maintain.
- Let the parents know that you support their efforts to accomplish what is necessary for their child to return home.
- Monitor/Check your own feelings. Be aware that you will have confusing and complex feelings – antagonism, anger, sadness, etc.
- Avoid promises/conflict. Always refer the birth parent to the social worker if you cannot answer a question. Avoid manipulation/triangulation.
- Meet with the birth parents/birth family, social worker and others regarding the case plan – visitation, medication, education, etc.
- Maintain frequent contact with your case worker, so that you and everyone else are working together as a team. Attend case planning conferences, school meetings, etc.



Individuals featured are models. Use of this image is for illustrative purposes only.

## Initial foster care phone calls: Information for parents, foster parents and facility staff

Initial foster care phone calls, also referred to as “comfort calls,”<sup>1</sup> are conversations between parents and caregivers of children in foster care to discuss efforts to ensure child well-being.

County and tribal social service agency caseworkers should attempt to coordinate initial phone calls between foster parent/s or facility staff and a child’s parents or legal guardian to establish connections and encourage ongoing information sharing. When separating children from their parents and placing them in foster care, they often experience significant stress and confusion. At the earliest stage of placement, an initial call builds connections between parents and foster care providers, supporting children’s transitions.

Parents know their children best and can help foster providers understand the best way to meet individual needs and preferences. A conversation between parents and foster care providers may minimize the impact of separation for children/youth and parents. Initial calls begin an established partnership between parents and foster care providers for shared caregiving. Direct contact with children requires prior authorization from the placing agency.

### Options for initiating a call

When possible, placing caseworkers inform and prepare parents and foster parents/facility staff of an initial call, providing an explanation and purpose. Staff from the placing or licensing agency can assist parents and foster parents/facility staff during or after initial calls if questions or concerns arise.

Initial calls are made at the time of placement,<sup>2</sup> outside the presence of children/youth. Initiate calls in several ways, as follows:

- After children arrive at a foster home/facility, placing caseworker and foster parents/facility staff can call parents together
- Placing caseworker calls parents to ask if they are willing to participate in an initial call, if yes, facilitate a three-way call
- Foster family/facility staff is provided contact information and initiates call to parents
- Foster care licensing workers can facilitate phone calls with foster families and parents.

### General information for discussion

The following provides guidance or information for discussion:

- Information from parents about their children that will help foster parents or facility staff to better understand and meet child’s best interests, as outlined in [Minn. Stat. 260C.212, subd. 2\(b\)](#), which includes children’s:
  - Current functioning and behaviors.
  - Medical needs.
  - Educational needs.
  - Developmental needs.
  - History and past experiences.
  - Religious and cultural needs.
  - Connections with community, school and faith community.
  - Interests and talents.
  - Relationships with current caretakers, parents, siblings and relatives.
- Information from foster parents/facility staff that will help parents to understand the environment and care provided to their children, including typical routines and activities.
- How children are doing.

<sup>1</sup>Comfort calls have been championed in Minnesota by the Quality Parenting Initiative – Minnesota (QPI – MN), a movement dedicated to strengthening the child welfare system in Minnesota. QPI – MN values birth families, relatives, and foster parents, creating mutually healthy relationships to care for children and youth. Recommendations are based on a guide created by QPI – MN.

<sup>2</sup>A placing agency caseworker may determine that an initial call will not be made because it poses danger to the mental or physical health of child or foster parent/s.



## Tips for a successful initial call

Initial calls help parents connect and create mutually healthy relationships with foster parents/facility staff; gain an understanding of where their child/ren are placed; how they are doing; and also provide tips on their children's immediate needs (routine, likes, how they like to be soothed, allergies, etc.) If an initial call is not arranged for at placement, ask assigned caseworker about the call process and its timing. Topics of discussion may include:

- Name/s child goes by
- Best strategies to comfort each child/youth
- Ways to help children stay connected to their culture
- The names of family members and other important individuals to children
- Favorite toys, games or foods
- What daily routines are, including school/daycare
- Medical information, including providers/primary clinic, prescriptions, food/medication and allergies
- Which health and hygiene products work best and/or what child prefers

■ For babies, if they are:

- Breast-fed, arrangements to get breastmilk
- Bottle-fed, type of formula and bottle/nipple that works best.

## What to do if an initial call becomes difficult or stressful

If an initial call is not going well, end it in a calm manner and indicate hope for future communication. If the placing caseworker does not participate in a call, contact them and share what happened.



Individuals featured are models. Use of this image is for illustrative purposes only.

651-431-4670

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