

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!

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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.

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