

## Resource Families Supporting Reunification

Reunification is the most common outcome for youth in out-of-home care. Foster parents are one of the most important resources to help children reunify with their families. For National Reunification Month 2017, the ABA's Center on Children and the Law interviewed foster families who made exceptional efforts to support reunification by building strong relationships with birth families.

When interviewing the resource families, we noticed common threads in their motivation, practices, and goals. Below is a summary of the interviews followed by a discussion of two models that support creating a stronger culture among resource families to support reunification.

Many thanks to the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at AdoptUSKids and the state and tribal agencies from Alabama, New Jersey, Oregon, Osage Nation, and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community for recommending resource families to interview, and to the resource families who generously set aside time to speak with us.



### **What motivates you to serve as resource families?**

Many resource families said they were originally motivated by their own experiences but remain motivated by seeing families reunify. A resource parent from Osage Nation/Oklahoma said, “When parents are motivated, that motivates us.” The resource parents shared the belief that families should be together whenever possible. One resource parent from Alabama said that when they saw “a family reunify, all the bits and pieces come together; it’s inspiring.”

Several resource families said that they remain in contact with birth families after reunification, offering support in the form of babysitting, advice, continued offers of love and statements of faith in their abilities.

### **How do you develop strong relationships with the family?**

The resource families said that building strong relationships with birth families led to easier reunifications and more stability for the children they were fostering. The resource parents stated that to start building that relationship, foster families need to focus on birth parents as people. A resource parent from New Jersey said, “You have to let go of your fear of the birth parents. Foster families need to see birth parents as people and help them as people.” A parent from Oregon said that when starting a relationship with birth families, foster parents need to let birth parents know that the foster family is not trying to replace them; the foster parents are there to support them.

### **Are there other ways you partner with the family?**

The resource families emphasized early and regular contact between the birth and foster families. The resource families said the earlier a foster family can meet the birth parents the better. According an Alabama resource parent, “with person-to-person communication, we can bridge gaps that the formal systems don’t cover.” Many resource parents mentioned inviting the

birth family to community activities, family holidays, and Sunday dinner. The Alabama parent said, “Bring the birth parents with you to IEP meetings and doctor appointments. Give copies of all documents to the parents so they know what is going on with their children.” Another said they encourage the children to call and video call with their parents. Several mentioned sending the birth parents pictures of the children as well as their art, school projects, and videos of the children playing.

### **How have you seen that your efforts to support reunification benefit the children?**

Being removed from your family is a traumatizing experience, especially for children who are then placed into an unknown person’s house. The resource families said that working with birth families helped mitigate the fear that children had about being away from home. One resource parent in Osage Nation/Oklahoma said, “It is comforting for the kids to know that the foster parents understand that the kids want to be with their birth parents. The kids feel empowered because they feel as though they are part of the goal.” Another said, “We have seen first-hand that the more people that the child knows loves them, [the more] they benefit.” A resource parent in Arizona who was a foster parent for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community said, “Any time the child sees the birth parents and foster parents work as team, is better for the child.” Most telling, a resource parent in Oregon said, “For kids who see their birth parents, there’s often a night and day difference between them and kids who don’t get to see their birth parents. Kids want to know where they come from. Kids who see parents are more secure; they see the biological connection of who they are.”

### **What did you learn about reunification?**

When we asked the resource families what they learned about reunification, many of them started laughing and replied, “It’s hard.” The resource families said it was hard for a number of reasons including how different the birth families can be from each other and from the resource families, how agencies aren’t always the best at supporting reunification, and how when children go home there is a profound sense of loss for the foster family that tinges their happiness that a family is back together. A resource parent in Salt River Pima/Arizona said, “You need more patience than you thought you’d ever need.” A resource family in Osage Nation/Oklahoma said that “every reunification is different. There is no magic book with all the answers. It’s difficult sometimes because you have to be very understanding. Parents don’t always express themselves well and you have to learn to work with that. Everyone is different.” A resource parent from Alabama said, “I wish I had known how hard it was going to be. I consider myself a strong person. I wish I’d known how hard it would be emotionally. I tell people when I teach the [foster parenting] classes, if it doesn’t affect your heart when a child returns home, you should quit.”

### **How could agencies better support reunification?**

Several resource families mentioned that there was a culture among some foster families focused on searching for children to adopt. A resource family said, “Foster parents who see fostering as a means to adopt become anti-reunification foster parents. When you’re fostering, you can’t just switch from not being interested in adopting to being interested in adopting, but foster families and agencies must not try to make adoption more likely than reunification.” Another resource parent said that often agencies become more concerned with policing birth parents than supporting reunification.

To remedy this, resource families said agencies should introduce birth and foster families whenever it is safe, clearly communicate to new foster families that reunification is the priority, and include more formal training on how to support reunification. A resource parent said the agencies should facilitate meetings with birth and foster parents by offering a space or contact information. She emphasized that the first question the agency should ask when placing a child shouldn't be "Would you want to adopt?" but instead "How can we facilitate a relationship?" Another resource family said, "Withholding information is not helpful. The agency should let birth parents know about the foster parents. Maybe the agency could start as the go-between but then step back once a relationship between the birth and foster parents is established." An interviewee said that agencies should "hold a formal training to support reunification. People are scared to get involved with families and often don't support reunification. We need to look at parents as human beings who just need to be cared for. Agencies should encourage people and give opportunities for foster parents to start relationships with birth parents."

### **Can you describe from your experience the importance of visitation?**

The resource families we spoke with said visitation was important to continuing relationships between parents and their children as well as providing an opportunity to establish relationships between birth parents and foster families. A resource family from New Jersey suggested sending children with everything they may need during visitation, including snacks and activities that parents and children can do together. The resource parent from Osage Nation/Oklahoma stated, "We never say no to visitation if there isn't a time conflict. I'm trying to get children back where they belong, with their families." The Osage Nation/Oklahoma resource parent also said visitation helps establish relationships between the parents and kids without the stress of taking care of the kids. The resource parent from Salt River Pima/Arizona

suggested bringing pictures, artwork, and school projects to visitation and suggested arriving early to visitation to be able to talk to the birth parents about their needs and any updates about their children.

**Are there any tips you would give to agencies and foster parents to help them support reunification?**

The resource families had several suggestions which largely fell within two categories. The first area of focus was the need for the child welfare agency to encourage reunification. A resource family said, “Foster families need to be encouraged by the agency to maintain reunification as a goal. Sometimes the agencies themselves are responsible for the negativity of the foster families.” Another resource parent said, “Adoption always needs to be secondary to reunification. Foster parents need to be on board with reunification from the beginning.” The resource family said that agencies need to “train foster families in the importance of reunification and help foster families start building a relationship with the birth parents.” The resource parent said everyone, foster families and agency staff alike, need more training about reunification and how it benefits children.

The resource families also focused on the need for more transition support for children and birth families. The resource family from Oregon discussed how difficult transitioning back to their birth families can be for children. “The kids are innocent bystanders who are affected by these things. The longer children have for notice, the better things go,” the resource parent suggested. The resource parent continued by saying that having a week or two weeks’ notice would allow children to discuss transition with their service providers and therapist, which would help them to prepare rather than deal with conflicted feelings after the transition. The families from Alabama and New Jersey suggested continuing to help birth parents after reunification,

such as by babysitting and simply serving as a sounding board. A New Jersey resource parent said, “Sometimes parents just need to hear it’s normal to be scared and overwhelmed. Being scared doesn’t make you a bad parent.”

Resource family support for reunification increases the likelihood of reunification and eases the trauma of foster care on children. Families can begin to support reunification through small actions with little to no cost, such as encouraging communication between children and their parents. The key to becoming a reunification supporter is treating birth parents with respect and dignity despite challenges and differences.

## Potential Practice Models

The resource families we interviewed focused on the need for agencies to find and train foster families to support reunification. This training should include the importance of visitation, as supported by recent studies,<sup>1</sup> and the role of foster families in improving the likelihood of reunification.<sup>2</sup> Resource families said agencies should closely examine the motivations of foster families as some foster families only want to foster until they find a child they want to adopt and do so whether reunification was an option for that child or not.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cantos AL1, Gries LT, Slis V. (1997). Behavioral correlates of parental visiting during family foster care. *Child Welfare*. 1997 Mar-Apr;76(2):309-29. *Children who had more frequent visitation showed lower behavior problems.*

Davis, I. P., Landsverk, J., Newton, R., & Ganger, W. (1996). Parental visiting and foster care reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(4/5), 363–382. *Children under 13 who were visited by their mothers were ten times more likely to reunify.*

Leathers, S. J. (2002). Parental visiting and family reunification: How inclusive practice makes a difference. *Child Welfare*, 81(4):595-616. *Inclusive practice leads to more frequent maternal visitation.*

<sup>2</sup> Bourgie C, Ricard N, Pelchat D. (1998). Beliefs of foster parents regarding the children in their care and their natural parents. *Sante Ment Que*. 23(1):149-62. [Article in French]. *Foster Families’ beliefs in needs of children and their birth parents directly correlates to likelihood of reunification.*

<sup>3</sup> National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment. (unk.) Helping Families Support Reunification. <http://www.nrcdr.org/develop-and-support-families/ideas-from-the-field/supporting-reunification>

Two potential models to support reunification are currently used in the United States and involve both foster and birth families: the Shared Family Care model and the Parent Collaboration model.

The Shared Family Care model<sup>4</sup> is the more intensive of the two models and involves a birth family moving in with a resource family to shared housing. This alleviates poverty and supervision-based concerns while reducing birth parents' level of stress while working to become more stable. Several hosting arrangements are common within reunification models<sup>5</sup>.

The Parent Collaboration Model is a more traditional model. The children live with the foster family but a stronger than typical relationship exists between foster families and birth parents as well as more frequent contact and visitation<sup>6</sup>. Several states have varying models but the basic structure remains similar. First, after children are removed to foster care and placed in a foster home, the foster family works with the case manager to set up an initial meeting. As meetings progress and an initial relationship between foster parents and birth parents emerges, caseworkers step back to allow the parents to continue communication.<sup>7</sup> Some programs use icebreakers<sup>8</sup> at group meetings, others meet individually or with a caseworker first.

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<sup>4</sup> Barth RP, Price A. (1999). Shared family care: providing services to parents and children placed together in out-of-home care. *Child Welfare*. 78(1):88-107.

<sup>5</sup> McGhee, Elizabeth. (2005). *Shared Family Care in Contra Costa County: An Opportunity for Change*. BASSC Executive Development Training Program: Participants' Case Studies - Class of 2005. <http://mackcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/chi-2016-05-06/CHI/TOC-CHI-66.pdf>

Price, A. & Barth, R.P. 119961. Shared Family Care Program Guidelines. Berkeley, CA: Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center, School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED425857.pdf>

Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center. (2009). *Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First*. <http://wiadopt.org/Resources/Tip-Sheets/Honoring-Family-Connections/Shared-Parenting-Putting-the-Needs-of-Children-First>

<sup>6</sup> Foster, Donna. Building a Positive Relationship with Birth Parents. *Fostering Perspectives*, 13(1). <http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv13n1/foster.htm>

Goodman, Denise. (2009). Building a Bridge: Strengthening connections between parents and foster parents. *Rise Magazine*, 13, pg 5. [http://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Rise\\_issue\\_13-foster-parents.pdf](http://www.risemagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Rise_issue_13-foster-parents.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association. (2008). *Completing the Circle: Uncovering, Discovering & Creating Connections for Your Children*. [http://www.ifapa.org/pdf\\_docs/CompletingtheCircle.pdf](http://www.ifapa.org/pdf_docs/CompletingtheCircle.pdf)

Foster families can quickly improve the likelihood of reunification at an individual level. System-wide improvement, however, must start with agencies focusing on reunification support programs and foster family reunification training. This training can be included in existing foster parent training and continuing education classes required by many states. Of the two models, the Parent Collaboration Model is less invasive and requires fewer start-up costs than the Shared Family Care model,<sup>9</sup> allowing for more immediate reunification support.

The National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at AdoptUSKids has compiled ideas and strategies to help child welfare systems to recruit, develop, and support resource parents who can actively support reunification when it is the best permanency option for a child in their care.

Visit the NRCDR website: <http://www.nrcdr.org/develop-and-support-families/ideas-from-the-field/supporting-reunification>.

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Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association. (2009). *Resource Parents Partnering with Birth Parents to Benefit Children*. [http://www.ifapa.org/pdf\\_docs/ResourceParentsPartneringWithBirthParents.pdf](http://www.ifapa.org/pdf_docs/ResourceParentsPartneringWithBirthParents.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012). *Resources for Holding Icebreaker Meetings Between Birth and Foster Parents*. <http://www.aecf.org/blog/resources-for-holding-icebreaker-meetings-between-birth-and-foster-parents/>

New York State Citizens' Coalition For Children, Inc. (2009). *Foster Parents Speak: Crossing Bridges and Fostering Change*. <http://affcn.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/discussionguide.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Barth RP, Price A. (1999). Shared family care: providing services to parents and children placed together in out-of-home care. *Child Welfare*. 78(1):88-107.

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June is National Reunification Month  
For more information see [www.ambar.org/nrm](http://www.ambar.org/nrm)