

Foster Parents' Perspectives on the Benefits of Collaborative Relationships with Birth Parents

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Interviews with 22 foster parents as part of Oregon's Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project¹ provide useful insight into:

- **How** relationships facilitate better care for foster children as well as enhanced support for birth parents
- **Ways to promote** relationships between foster parents and birth parents



The Administration for Children and Families advocates for collaborative relationships between foster parents and birth parents as a way to support the well-being of children and families (Milner, 2019). Research suggests that positive and productive relationships between birth parents and foster parents can promote well-being for children in substitute care (Chateauneuf, Turcotte, & Drapeau, 2018; Morrison, Mishna, Cook, & Aitken, 2011).

BENEFITS OF FOSTER PARENT – BIRTH PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

Collaborative relationships between birth parents and foster parents can improve care for foster children and increase support for birth parents in a variety of ways.

¹Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare (DHS-CW) developed an intervention focused on reducing the time to permanency for children likely to have long-term stays in foster care. Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) has four key components: monthly case planning meetings, enhanced family finding, peer parent mentoring, and team collaboration. LIFE staff include a trained meeting facilitator, administrative support staff, and a paid peer parent mentor. The LIFE practice values are strengths-based, trauma-informed, parent-directed/ youth-guided, and cultural responsiveness.

Getting to know birth parents and being able to ask questions and engage in conversations meant foster parents had **better information about children and their needs**, and as a result, they could **provide more effective and supportive care**. Meetings afforded foster parents a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding the case as well as some of the history and family dynamics. As one foster parent stated, a “better idea of how the parents worked” helped foster parents to understand the underlying causes of children’s behaviors. Being well-informed also allowed foster parents to support children through the progression of their cases; a foster parent remarked, “it does hopefully allow us to better help guide the children through what is actually happening in their life.”

Regular communication between foster parents and birth parents enabled them to **share ideas and problem solve**. When sufficient rapport had been established, it was sometimes possible to discuss sensitive issues such as the impact a parent’s behavior had on the children. One foster parent explained, “I think we just came to know each other and we can actually just come right out and say it.” They also worked to ensure that they were **sharing consistent information with and presenting a united front** to the children.

Greater familiarity and closer relationships helped foster parents to be **more empathetic and less judgmental** towards birth parents. Having a more positive perception encouraged some foster parents to **offer more assistance to birth parents** than they might have otherwise.

“ The plan is reunification, so let’s work toward that, so we would do what we could to talk with the parents, especially at LIFE meetings, but (also) in follow-ups outside of that because of the bridge that created.”

— Foster Parent

These closer, more positive relationships encouraged some foster parents to make it possible for **children to have contact with their birth parents outside of the ‘official’ visits** supported by the agency. For example, some foster parents felt comfortable sharing their telephone number so birth parents could have phone calls in between visits. Other foster parents reported that they invited birth parents to their homes for holidays or other celebrations.

Finally, relationships at times resulted in foster and birth parents **maintaining connections after the child welfare cases closed**. Some foster parents described on-going contact with children and birth parents after reunification, while others reported that birth parents would continue to have contact with children even after adoption or guardianship are completed. In this way, regardless of what permanency looks like, children have a multitude of caring, supportive adults in their lives.

HOW TO PROMOTE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Foster parents identified a number of factors that helped develop and support their relationships with birth parents. They most often reported that simply having **opportunities for regular, on-going communication** and conversation encouraged relationship-building. The monthly LIFE meetings provided such an opportunity, as well as before and after meetings.

During monthly LIFE meetings, foster parents received information about **birth parents' life experiences** and the efforts they were making for their children. This helped shift many foster parents' perceptions of birth parents from just the circumstances that led to placement to a more holistic view and, as one foster parent described, "see that more human side".

The **strengths-based and parent-directed** nature of the LIFE meetings prompted many foster parents to view birth parents in a more positive light. This can be beneficial in reducing power differentials as foster parents recognize their alignment with birth parents in their shared goals for the safety and well-being of children.

Foster parents often discussed discomfort, at least initially, with talking to birth parents about sensitive topics or confrontational issues. The trained meeting facilitators helped foster parents and birth parents (along with other team members) **navigate difficult conversations** without jeopardizing relationships.

Foster parents recognized the innate tension in parenting someone else's children, and many appreciated the facilitators' ability to address concerns with a focus on solutions.

Many foster parents came to their roles committed to partnering with birth parents. However, that was not always the case, and the monthly LIFE meetings helped facilitate a more **supportive perspective of birth parents**. As one foster parent described, "I had a very bad attitude about the parents from the beginning, I'll be honest. I was, 'You are worthless, you don't deserve your children back, don't even want to talk to you'. I feel like the LIFE meetings have had a lot to do with me being more kind to them. It is not my place to judge them, and it is my place to try to heal the situation, to play my role in doing that. The LIFE meetings have really helped me to be able to get to a better place where I can do that."

The regular meetings offered ongoing opportunities for foster parents and birth parents to interact with each other, develop empathy and understanding, and work collaboratively towards shared goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from foster parent interviews suggest that child welfare agencies should make efforts to promote and support collaborative relationships between foster parents and birth parents. Child welfare leaders and caseworkers should:

- Highlight the benefits that these relationships can have for birth parents, children, and foster parents.
- Facilitate regular meetings or other opportunities for foster and birth parents that encourage meaningful interactions.
- Learn about the challenges that foster parents perceive as barriers to building relationships with birth parents and work together to overcome them.
- Pay close attention to the power dynamics that could contribute to those challenges; for example:
 - ✓ Reconsider language about birth parents that influences negative perceptions by foster parents.
 - ✓ Involve birth parents and foster parents in discussions about children (their needs, problem-solving, etc.).

RESOURCES

Chateauneuf, D., Turcotte, D., & Drapeau, S. (2018). The relationship between foster care families and birth families in a child welfare context: The determining factors. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(1), 71-79.

Milner, J. (2019, May 1). Foster care as a support to families, not a substitute for parents. *The Family Room Blog, Administration for Children and Families*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/blog/2019/05/foster-care-as-a-support-to-families-not-a-substitute-for-parents>.

Morrison, J., Mishna, F., Cook, C., & Aitken, G. (2011). Access visits: Perceptions of child protection workers, foster parents and children who are crown wards. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(9), 1476– 1482.

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