Shared Parenting

Competencies and Objectives

Competency:
Is able to initiate and encourage a positive partnership between foster parents and birth parents.

Objectives: 1. Can give at least two examples of the practice of the 6 principles of partnership impacting the development of shared parenting partnerships.
2. Can state two reasons for identifying common ground (connections) between foster parents and birth parents.

Competency:
Is able to identify fears associated with Shared Parenting that create challenges to partnerships and develop strategies for dealing with these fears.

Objectives: 1. Can name at least 3 fears of each partner (foster parent, birth parent and social worker) that may occur related to shared parenting.
3. Can identify 3 strategies that can be utilized for helping foster parents, birth parents and social workers deal with those fears.

Competency:
Is able to understand how partnership between foster parents and birth parents can play a role in reunification and making a permanent plan for the child.

Objectives: 1. Can understand the Alliance Model and can explain the concept of partnership in the model.
2. Can name at least three boundary concerns that might be negotiated to enhance the partnership between foster parents and birth parents after reunification.
3. Can identify the steps for preparing social workers and both sets of parents for the initial shared parenting meeting.

Competency:
Is able to apply strategies to help birth parents and foster parents work in partnership toward the best interests of the child.

Objectives: 1. Can explain the importance of identifying underlying needs when determining strategies that build partnerships.
2. Can name two additional strategies for building partnerships between foster parents, birth parents, and the child welfare social worker.
3. Can identify two steps, consistent with job/role in the agency, which will be taken to support shared parenting.

**Competency:**
Is able to understand resistance and identify strategies for overcoming resistance as challenges to practice occur.

**Objectives:**
1. Can identify at least two reasons foster parents and social workers, and other child welfare community partners may resist the shift to the practice of shared parenting.
2. Can identify two approaches that may help foster parents and workers feel safe and more confident during the transition to shared parenting practice.
SHARED PARENTING
DAY ONE AGENDA

I. INTRODUCTIONS AND WELCOME
   BREAK

II. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

III. FOUNDATION AND PHILOSOPHY
   LUNCH
   CONT. FOUNDATION

IV. RECOGNIZING/IDENTIFYING FEARS
   BREAK
   CONT. FEARS

V. CLOSING

VI. MAPP LEADERS STAY TO RECEIVE BOOKS AND BRIEF MANUAL DESCRIPTION

DAY TWO AGENDA

I. WELCOME AND REVIEW OF DAY ONE

II. MAINTAINING FAMILY AND CULTURAL TIES
   BREAK

III. “FAMILY FOREVER” VIDEO

IV. MAKING AND MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES
   LUNCH

V. COMMUNICATION AMONG TEAM MEMBERS
   BREAK

VI. PARTICIPANTS’ CASES

VII. CLOSING
An Introduction to Shared Parenting

Framework of Shared Parenting

Shared Parenting represents an active alliance among the important people in the child’s life: birth parent, foster parents and agency workers. Recognizing that the connection between parents and their children is the single most powerful relationship upon which to preserve or rebuild families, shared parenting emphasizes establishing an alliance with parents to protect their children rather than just an alliance with children to protect them from their parents.

Within the shared parenting framework, child welfare staff and foster parents work as a team. As with any effective team, players have different roles, responsibilities and tasks, but each team member has the same goal, in this case, to preserve, or rebuild, the family around the long-term welfare of the child. This requires that the team members form a partnership or positive alliance with the birth parents, always seeking to keep parents focused on the welfare of the child.

Historically, child welfare agencies have primarily emphasized their mission of child protection; therefore, the agency’s primary helping alliance has been with the child. The purpose of this alliance is to ensure that the child’s needs of nurturance and safety are met. Since the main threat to child safety is generally parental behavior, the alliance seeks to shield the child from risk created by the parents. While the intended benefits of safety are real, both the child and the parents may tend to experience the intervention as reducing emotional and physical safety, rather than increasing it.

Shared Parenting Emphasizes Foster Parents as Support not Substitutes

Abbreviated time frames mandated by legislation such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) increase the urgency for foster parents and birth parents to begin working together quickly, whenever possible. ASFA was designed to focus child welfare agencies on the issues of safety, well-being and more timely permanence for children. In addition to placing children on a fast track to permanency, ASFA significantly changed the foster parent role.

In the shared parenting framework, foster parents play vital roles, supplementing and supporting birth families rather than substituting for them. Therefore, they need explicitly defined social contracts with birth families. Foster parents must be prepared to care for a child independently while psychologically sharing the child with others.

A Sharing Partnership vs. a Controlling Intervention

With the mission of protecting the child, the agency’s natural tendency is to align with the child. The agency seeks to restore the flow of nurturance and limit excessive parental control. Since this intervention is mostly involuntary on the part of the parent, the agency must first establish blame and damage, or risk of damage, before it can legally intervene. These two circumstances generally cause the parents to see the agency as a threat to their attachment to their child.

Agencies often use attachment to extract change in parental behavior. The offered social contract with the parent is, “If you meet the term of the case plan, you can keep your child in your family,” The threatened loss of the child is used by the agency to socially control the parental behavior that is placing the child at risk.
A problem of a control-centered intervention is that it tends to place the parents in a childlike position. In terms of family systems, this placed the parent below the parental boundary and confuses the parent-child relationship. Though control of parental behavior may be necessary to protect a child, ultimately the success of the intervention will require attention to parental needs as well. Since 99 percent of interventions begin with the preservation of the family or the return of the child to the family as a goal, nurturing the child through the parent is an essential condition for the future.

Though services are offered to the parent and are intended to support the parent, the parent may not experience that support as nurturance. To the extent that the parents have been engaged around their needs, especially the needs and goals for the development and safety of their children, the offers may be experienced as nurturance. To the extent that parents are engaged primarily around the agency’s needs to ensure child safety, the parents may experience the offer in much the same was as the truant youth who is ordered to attend school, presumably for his own benefit. If the youth were experiencing success at school, the order would probably not be necessary. The order in and of itself, however, will not alter the experience of attending school.

At worst, the child may feel conflict between loyalties to the birth family, foster family, and adoptive family. When the parents compete for the child’s loyalty, the child is again left with the dilemma of having to manage all the adult alliances, diverting energy from growth to psychological security.

**The Child’s Experience of Shared Parenting**

Entry in care presents new dilemmas for children. Attaching to the foster family may be an essential condition for the child to get his needs met. However, this attachment may jeopardize his attachment to the birth family. Maintaining the birth family attachment may also similarly reduce the motivation of the foster parents to form an attachment with the child, which is an essential component in their motivation to nurture and protect the child. The child may give up on the parental attachment, fail to attach to the foster family or seek to maintain a dual, and somewhat secret system of parallel alliances. Any of these are costly choices for children whose energies are spent trying to manage or “fix” adult relationships. This is why the shared parenting framework provides ways for the child to openly seek and maintain all connections necessary to his or her needs.

**Implications for Practice**

Within the share parenting framework, the word team is used to describe the staff, foster parents and other professional working together. In time birth parents can also become team members. However, at the beginning of the relationship, the best that agencies and foster parents may be able to hope for is to negotiate good working agreements with birth parents. Team building requires time and trust.

Overwhelmingly, agency efforts are directed toward the goal of maintaining the birth family as the primary parenting resource for children. Given this fact, agency efforts are judged by the extent to which they strengthen parenting capacities and family attachments. Foster parents can help or hinder these efforts. So foster families need to know the framework or model the agency uses in its child welfare practice. If a person is primarily interested in becoming a foster parent in order to protect and save children from harmful parents, his or her needs may not be met through the foster care program. The agency recruitment and public-education efforts must reflect the philosophy of the agency’s model of practice.

*Adapted from Child Welfare Institute Shared Parenting Leader’s Guide 2002*
SIX PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP

1. **Everyone desires respect.**

This principle is based on the idea that all people have worth and recognizes everyone’s right to self-determination, to make their own decisions about their lives. Acceptance of this principle leads one to treat clients with respect and to honor their opinions and worldview. True partnership is impossible without mutual respect.

2. **Everyone needs to be heard.**

This principle is based on Covey’s “seek first to understand” and is accomplished primarily through empathic listening. While empathic listening looks very much like active or reflective listening, what differentiates it is the listener’s motivation. Active and reflective listening are techniques that are often used to manage or manipulate someone’s behavior so that the listener can advance his own agenda. Empathic listening is motivated by the listener’s desire to truly understand someone’s point of view - to enter someone’s frame of reference without a personal agenda. When one feels heard and understood, defensiveness and resistance are unnecessary, and solutions can be sought.

3. **Everyone has strengths.**

This principle recognizes that all people have many resources, past successes, abilities, talents, dreams, etc. that provides the raw material for solutions and future success. As “helpers” we become involved with people because of their problems; these problems then become a filter that obscures our ability to see strengths. Acceptance of this principle doesn’t mean that one ignore or minimizes problems; it means that one works hard to identify strengths as well as problems so that the helper and the client have a more balanced, accurate, and hopeful picture.

4. **Judgments can wait.**

This principle recognizes that once a judgment is made, one’s tendency is to stop gathering new information or to interpret in light of the prior judgment. Therefore, since a helper’s judgments can have an immense impact on a client’s life, it is only fair to delay judgment as long as possible, then to hold it lightly, while remaining open to new information and willing to change one’s mind. Acceptance of this principle does not mean that decisions regarding safety cannot be made quickly; it simply requires that ultimate judgments be very well considered.

5. **Partners share power.**

This principle is based on the premise that power differentials create obstacles to partnership. Since society confers power upon the helper, it is the helper’s responsibility to create a partnership with a client, especially those who appear hostile, resistant, etc. Clients do not owe us their cooperation; we must earn it.

6. **Partnership is a process.**

This principle recognizes that each of the six principles is part of a greater whole. While each has merit on its own, all are necessary for partnership. Each principle supports and strengthens the others. In addition, this principle acknowledges that putting the principles into practice consistently is hard. Acceptance of the principles is not enough; it requires intention and attention to practice the principles.

Potential Scaling Questions for Use with Foster Parents and Birth Parents

**Foster Parents:**
How willing are you to work in cooperation with the birth families of the children you foster?
10- I am very willing and can’t imagine not including them in their children’s lives.
1- I am not willing and do not see the importance of working closely with birth families.

How important is the birth parent’s role in parenting this child?
10- I see the birth parent as vital and an integral part in parenting this child.
1- I don’t see that the birth parent plays any part of parenting this child/ I don’t see their role as important.

**Birth Parents:**
How open are you to partnering with the foster parents around the care of your child?
10- I feel very open toward working with the foster parents and am willing to work in partnership.
1- I am not willing to work in partnership with the foster parents and do not plan to be cooperative with them.

How confident are you about working in partnership with foster parents?
10- I feel very confident that we can find a way to work together for the good of the child.
1- I am very uncomfortable working closely with foster parents and am not sure that we can find ways to work together.

**Follow up questions for birth & foster parents:**
What do you think would help you feel more comfortable working with the foster parents/ birth parents?
What might help you to move up the scale one point?
What makes you a 2?
What do you think would help you get to being a 3?
What would it look like if you were a 3 or 4?

Keep in mind when you are asking families what it might take for them to move along the scale that you should only ask them about moving one or two points on the scale.

You may also want to assess how the foster parents feel about Shared Parenting before and after additional in-service training as a potential measure of training effectiveness.
Video Observations
For
“Family Connections”

When did you see the 6 principles demonstrated by the actions or words of the adoptive parents?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are the benefits of shared parenting for children when they have been placed for adoption?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are the benefits of shared parenting for adoptive parents?

________________________________________________________________________
Order Form for Family Connections DVD

Date:________________

Number of Copies Requested_____ X $7.50 = Total:_______________

English___ Spanish Subtitles_____

Ship DVD(s) to:

Name:

Company Name:

Street Address:

City, State, Zip

Phone:

E-Mail address:

Mail above order form along with check or money order to:

Adoptions Unlimited, Inc.
Family Connections Project
Phyllis Tidwell, Executive Assistant
120 W. Madison, Ste 800
Chicago, Il 60602

Free Online Course:
Go to http://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org to find the free online course, “Maintaining Connections,” which utilizes excerpts from this Family Connections DVD.
**Alliance Model**

We know that there are many types of families. We are going to use for purposes of this example a couple who have connected and their connection has created a child.

What is the job of the parent?

What is the job of the child?

Every family has stressors. What are some stressors that families face?

What happens to the child and the child’s job during times of stress?

Who often gets called when a family is experiencing high levels of stress?

With whom does the agency (historically) align first?

What happens to the parents if/when the agency aligns with the child first?

What does this do to the relationship between the agency and the parents?

How do parents express this?

Developmentally, where would you say the parents are functioning at this point?

When the child is unable to remain safely in the home, who is called?

With whom does the foster parent typically align? Who next?
Why might it be important for the foster parents to align with the birth parents?

What might stress among the adult relationships do to the child’s job?

Who is called in when children are unable to return home and foster parents are, for whatever reason, unable to make a permanent commitment to a child?

With whom do the adoptive parents first align? (first, second, third, and fourth)

Why might it be important for the adoptive parents to align with birth parents, if only psychologically?

What happens to a child when there is stress/ conflict among all these adult relationships?

What are the benefits (for children) of having the adults work together- if only symbolically?
The Alliance Model is an idea developed for staff and parents in child welfare to promote partnerships in parenting. This model of practice is even more important today with the passage of legislation such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act, Public Law 105-89, also known as ASFA. ASFA was designed to focus child welfare agencies on the issues of safety, well-being and more timely permanence for children. With abbreviated time frames, it is important that parents of children in foster care begin working together quickly, whenever possible.

This diagram is called “The Alliance Model.” An alliance in a family refers to two members sharing a common goal or interest that is not detrimental to any other members of the family. The lines and arrows in the diagram represent alliances.

The line between the two parents show that they are united, or have formed an alliance, to care for the child and meet his or her needs so that the child can concentrate on growing up and completing important developmental tasks. The slash marks represent a damaged or broken parental alliance. When the positive alliance of parents is damaged or broken, children respond in a variety of ways. Some children who perceive that their parents are not united in seeking the collective good of the family often try to “fix” the family. They begin parenting the parents, as well as younger siblings. When they do this, they often rise above the normal parental boundary line. Other children respond by creating a decoy for all the battling. They may begin acting in ways that capture the parents’ attention. Parents may begin aiming their tensions at the child rather than at each other. In the child’s mind, at least the parents are united again. Other children respond to the parents’ broken alliance by withdrawing, which likewise, can serve to unite the parents around the child’s good. Whatever the response, the energy of the child is directed toward preserving the family, rather than toward the “job” of childhood, which...
entails growing into a healthy and strong adult. Consequently, at best, the family is at risk of deteriorating in function. At worst, the family is at risk of disintegrating altogether, leaving the child at risk of being without the love and nurturance needed for him or her to grow and develop.

In this circumstance the child must develop two separate alliances in a two-parent home – one with Mom and one with Dad – in order to survive. No longer can he or she rely on the parental alliance. Children faced with this conflict often shield their loyalty to one parent from the other. Alternatively, they may feign dislike for one parent as a way of preserving loyalty to the other. In either case, the child is emotionally at risk and must divert energy toward social survival in the conflicted world of the adults.

Historically, child welfare agencies have primarily emphasized their mission of child protection; therefore, the primary helping alliance has been with the child. The purpose of this alliance is to ensure that the child’s needs of nurturance and safety are met. Since the main threat to child safety is generally parental behavior, the alliance seeks to shield the child from risk created by the parents. While the intended benefits of safety are real, both the child and the parents may tend to experience the intervention as reducing emotional and physical safety, rather than increasing it.

With the mission of protecting the child, the agency’s natural tendency is to align with the child. The agency seeks to restore the flow of nurturance and limit excessive parental control. Since this intervention is mostly involuntary on the part of the parent, the agency must first establish blame and damage, or risk of damage, before it can legally intervene. These two circumstances generally cause the parents to see the agency as a threat to their attachment to their child.

Agencies often use attachment to extract change in parental behavior. The offered social contract with the parent is, “If you meet the terms of the case plan, you can keep your child in your family.” The threatened loss of the child is used by the agency to socially control the parental behavior that is placing the child at risk.

Although services are offered to the parent and are intended to support the parent, the parent may not experience that support as nurturance. To the extent that the parents have been engaged around their needs, especially the needs and goals for the development and safety of their children, the offers may be experienced as nurture. To the extent that the parents are engaged primarily around the agency’s needs to ensure child safety, the parents may experience the offer in much the same way as the truant youth who is ordered to attend school, presumably for his own benefit. If the youth were experiencing success at school, the order would probably not be necessary. The order in and of itself, however, will not alter the experience of attending school.

The child also may sense the intervention as a threat to his or her emotional security. To the extent that the agency’s alliance with the child creates conflicting loyalty between the parental attachment and the child’s relationship to the agency, the child will experience the situation in a similar way as when conflict began between his or her parents.

A problem of a control-centered intervention is that it tends to place the parents in a childlike position. In terms of family systems, this places the parent below the parental boundary and confuses the parent-child relationship. Although control of parental behavior may be necessary to protect a child, ultimately the success of the intervention will require attention to parental needs as well. Since 99 percent of interventions begin with the preservation of the family or the return of the child to the family as a goal, nurturing the child through the parent is an essential condition for the future.
When safety cannot be ensured within the family, a foster family is frequently chosen for a child. Through the preparation and selection process, foster parents are initially aligned with the agency. Since the primary role of foster parents is to meet the child’s needs for nurturance and safety, the foster family quickly works to form a positive alliance with the child, although today they also form alliances with biological parents.

More than the agency’s alliance with the child, the attachment of the foster family to the child is likely to be perceived by the birth parents as a serious threat to their attachment with the child. The child is presented with a new dilemma. Attaching to the foster family may be an essential condition to getting his or her needs met. However, this attachment may jeopardize his or her attachment to the birth family. Maintaining the birth family attachment may also similarly reduce the motivation of the foster parents to form an attachment with the child, which is an essential component in their motivation to nurture and protect the child. The child may give up on the parental attachment, fail to attach to the foster family or seek to maintain a dual, and somewhat secret system of parallel alliances.

Any of these are costly choices for the child. The best of all possible worlds is that the child can openly seek and maintain all connections necessary to his or her needs. The possibility for this depends on the teamwork of the agency and foster parents and the strength of their partnership with the child’s birth parents.

When a child cannot be parented by his or her birth parents or adopted by a foster family, then another family is found to provide the life-long attachment for the child. When this happens, the adoptive family works to form a positive alliance with the child. Since a stronger attachment is often necessary for a lifetime commitment or attachment to be formed, the adoptive parents may view detaching the child from connections with the agency, foster parents and birth family as a necessary act in ensuring the full attention of the child to the attachment with the adoptive family. Unfortunately, the loss of these connections at the psychological level leaves holes in the child’s identity and undermines the child’s concept of self.

At worst, the child may feel conflict between loyalties to the birth family, foster family and adoptive family. When the parents compete for the child’s loyalty, the child is again left with the dilemma of having to manage all the adult alliances, which diverts energy from growth to psychological security.

When a child in a foster or adoptive home perceives that the adults are not allied around his or her welfare, the child will feel threatened. Maintaining a relationship with the birth family is important to the child because identity and self-concept begin with that alliance. The alliance with the agency is important because the agency represents the power to move children at will, or so it seems to the child. The foster family or adoptive family alliance is important because daily nurturing and care is ensured there. So, when a child perceives that adults are not allied among themselves, the child responds in ways similar to his or her response to parental conflict. The difference is that now there are more alliances to manage or “fix”, and even less energy remains for the child to grow and enjoy his or her childhood. That is why we say the adults in a child’s life must work together as team members or as partners.

Teamwork – Teamwork involves two or more people working together according to a coordinated plan, in a relationship where team members assume different roles and responsibilities, all designed to reach the same goal. Team members can be relied upon to assume their specific jobs or responsibilities.

Within the alliance model, child welfare staff and foster parents work as a team. As in any effective team, players have different roles, responsibilities and tasks, but each team member has the same goal, in this case, to preserve, or rebuild, the family around the long-term welfare of the child. This requires that the team members
form a partnership or positive alliance with the birth parents, always seeking to keep parents focused on the welfare of the child.

**Partnership** – A *partnership* is a relationship where two or more parties each contribute something of value in order to receive benefits. The nature of the contribution and the distribution of benefits are defined by the social contract between the parties.

**Social Contract** – A *social contract* is an agreement entered into by the mutual consent of parties desiring to exchange something of value. When there is coercion, a contract is not valid. When there is no exchange, there is no contract. When there are no contributions, there is no partnership.

Since we define teamwork and partnership a bit differently in the Alliance Model, we usually use the term “team” to describe the staff, foster parents and other professionals working together. Hopefully the birth parents can become team members. However, at the beginning of the relationship, the best we can hope for is to negotiate good working agreements in partnership. Building partnerships builds trust and agreement between people over time.

Within the Alliance Model, the agency’s goal is to establish an alliance with parents to protect their children rather than just an alliance with children to protect them from their parents. Overwhelmingly, agency efforts are directed toward the goal of maintaining the birth family as the primary parenting resource for children. Given this fact, agency efforts are judged by the extent to which they strengthen parenting capacities and family attachments. Foster parents can help or hinder these efforts. Therefore, foster families need to know the framework or model the agency uses in its child welfare practice. If a person is primarily interested in becoming a foster parent in order to protect and save children from harmful parents, his or her needs may not be met through the foster care program. The agency recruitment and public-education efforts must reflect the philosophy of the agency’s model of practice.

Foster parents play vital roles, supplementing and supporting birth families rather than substituting for them. They, too, need explicitly defined social contracts with birth families. Foster parents must be prepared to care for a child independently while psychologically sharing the child with others. Foster parents make a vital contribution to the partnership when they accept a child’s relationships.

The job of public or private child welfare agencies is to preserve, or help rebuild, families at risk of deterioration. The single most powerful relationship upon which to build is the connection between the child and his or her parents.

*Adapted from Thomas D. Morton, “Partnerships in Parenting” and GPS- MAPP Trainer’s Guide, Child Welfare Institute, July 1999*
Seven Dynamics of Change

- People will feel awkward
- People will initially focus on what they have to give up
- People will feel alone
- People can handle only so much change
- People are at different levels of readiness for change
- People will be concerned that they don’t have enough resources
- People will revert back to old behavior without encouragement
The Birth Parents’ Grief Process
Written by Donna Foster and
Adapted from Charles Horejsi’s “Working with Biological Parents”

SHOCK:
Parent is in disbelief. The words people are saying don’t sink in or make sense. The parent feels like he/ she is sleepwalking. The only thing on his/ her mind is that his/ her child is gone. Behaviors of parents may be: shaking, screaming, crying or swearing at any given time, and overwhelmed with worries about their child. The parent may promise the social worker anything without understanding what they promised. Parent may be in denial and is sure the child will return tomorrow.

PROTEST:
Grief shows itself more physically. The parent may feel sadness or anger and the symptoms could be upset stomach, low or no appetite. He/ she may have headaches, can’t sleep and is very tired. If anger is strong, she may be angry at everyone. The parent may make demands or threats. He/ she may swear or cry for no apparent reason. It may be easier to blame others for the situation than to accept any responsibility. This could be a way of coping with despair and depression.

ADJUSTMENT:
Things start to settle down. The sooner the parent has an ally, such as the social worker and foster parent, the sooner this adjustment occurs. The parent does not worry about their children’s safety or loyalty if trust in the foster parent has developed. The child becomes the focus of the team. Those assisting the birth parent can be the social workers, foster parents, guardian ad litem, therapists and other community resources. The parent builds on their parenting skills and actively participates in co-parenting their children with the foster parents. The social worker, foster parent and birth parent develop a strong Shared Parenting Team. The parent fulfills their obligations and meets the case plan goals.
The Cycle of Need

The Cycle of Need is a visual demonstration of ways behaviors (Expression) demonstrate needs (Underlying Conditions). Solutions (Interventions) can be designed to control the expression of need (Social Control) or can be designed to meet the underlying condition (Nurture or Trust-Building). The Strengths Approach uses strengths to help meet underlying needs.

Social Workers

Bridging the gap of separation between children and their families

A Continuum of Contact

- Talk positively about birth parent to foster parent
- Serve as liaison between foster parent and birth parent
- Serve as positive role model to foster parent and birth parent
- Arrange phone contact between foster parent/birth parent
- Describe foster parent in non-identifying terms at placement
- Debrief foster parent regarding birth parent problems/needs
- Encourage exchange of information between birth parent and foster parent
- Have birth parent/foster parent exchange pictures
- Share all information with foster parent/birth parent
- Facilitate the development of a collaborative relationship between birth parent and foster parent
- Encourage foster parent to allow birth parent to call foster home
- Set clear boundaries for contact
- Help foster parent understand the birth parent’s problems
- Talk openly with birth parent/foster parent about their concerns
- Mediate and resolve conflicts
- Exchange monthly progress reports with birth parent/foster parent
- Encourage birth parent to permit foster parent to call home
- Assist foster parent/birth parent in understanding cultural differences
- Facilitate conversation between birth parent/foster parent
- Schedule regular and frequent visitation
- Participate in visitations
  - * Insure that foster parent/birth parent attend agency meetings
  - * Encourage foster parents to host sibling visits
  - * Have foster parent and birth parent to work on life book together
  - * Permit foster parent to invite birth parent to attend all appointments
  - * Assist foster parent/birth parent in managing conflict
  - * Assist foster parent in welcoming birth parent to home
  - * Assist birth parent welcoming foster parent to home
  - * Encourage foster parent to transport child to home
  - * Allow foster parent/birth parent to schedule all visitation
  - * Empower foster parent to set limits and boundaries re: Contact and visitation
  - * Encourage post reunification contact
  - * Suggest that foster parent can provide respite care after reunification

Adapted from the work of Annie E. Casey Foundation
Foster Parents

Bridging the gap of separation between children and their families

A Continuum of Contact

- Have positive view of child’s family
- Talk openly with child about family
- Attend training to learn how to work directly with birth parent
- Call child’s parent on phone
- Learn about, understand, and respect the birth parents’ culture
- Provides written information for PPAT
- Exchange letters with child’s family via social worker
- Request pictures of child’s family to display in child’s room
- Give parents pictures of child
- Share copies of homework and report cards with family
- Non-threatening attitude
- Encourage parent to phone child
- Foster parent host/arranges sibling visits
- Send snack/activity for visit
- Dress child up for visits
- Shares monthly progress report with BP
- Transport child to visit
- *Talk with parent at visit
- *Brag to parent about child
- *Request cultural information from birth parent
- *Encourage parent’s progress
- *Refer to child as “your child” to parent

- *Attend staffings, PPATs, court reviews, and family meetings
- *Share parenting information
- *Share child’s life book with parents
- *Serve as parent’s mentor
- *Give parents verbal progress reports
- *Review child’s visits with parent
- *Invite child’s family to attend school programs
- *Meets child’s family at placement
- *Help birth parent find community resources
- *Ask parent to come to appointments
- *Take/pick up child to/at parent’s home
- *Foster parent transports parent to meetings
- *Assist in planning child’s return to birth home
- *Welcome child’s parent into foster parent’s home
- *Attend parenting classes with parents
- *Arrange family visits with parents
- *Serve as support to family following reunification
- *Foster parents provides respite care
- *Include birth parent in farewell activities

Adapted from the work of Annie E. Casey Foundation

Shared Parenting- Day 1
NCDSS rev 10/18
Birth Parents

Bridging the gap of separation between children and their families

A Continuum of Contact

- Send card/letters to child at foster home via social worker
- Send family pictures to child via social worker
- Attend all visits/meetings
- Attend all classes/appointments
- Make regular contact with social worker
- Plan special activities for visits
- Remember child’s birthday and holidays
- Talk with child about separation
- Write down important information about child such as diet, routine, habits, etc.
- Send medical/school/etc. records to foster parent via social worker
- Encourage child to cooperate with placement
- Share critical cultural information with foster parent
- Discuss child’s activities with foster parent at visits
- Share family information with foster parent
- Arrange phone calls from child
- Develop positive relationship with foster parent
- *Talk with foster parent at agency meetings
- Give foster parent your home phone number
- Do not make unrealistic promises to child
- Avoid giving child a specific date for reunification

- Learn about, understand, and respect the foster parent’s culture
- Phone child at foster home
- Call foster parent for help with parenting problem*Attend school meetings with foster parent
- *Help develop the child’s life book
- *Include foster parent in visitation activities
- *Invite foster parent to your home
- *Invite foster parent to child’s birthday party
- *Discuss case plan progress with foster parent
- *Review child’s behavior with foster parent
- *Invite foster parent to attend parenting classes with you
- *Ask foster parent for help in locating community resources
- *Include foster parent in child’s return home
- *Visit child in foster home
- *Work with foster parent on discipline problems
- *Allow child to keep in contact with foster parent after reunification
- *Work with foster parent to solve school problems
- *Include foster parent in holiday celebrations
- Show appreciation to foster parent
- *Offer to take child to appointments for foster parent

Adapted from the work of Annie E. Casey Foundation
Shared Parenting Partners

Foster/ Kinship Parent
- Food
- Clothing
- Education
- Medical Attention
- Discipline
- Nurturing
- Plan for permanence

Birth Parent
- Life
- Gender
- Physical Appearance
- Talents, Traditions/Culture
- Discipline
- Nurturing
- Food
- Clothing
- Medical Attention
- Plan for permanence

Legal Parent/DSS
- Medical Consent for Care
- Legal Consents
- Financial Support
- Physical Safety & Security
- Plan for permanence

Adapted from: New York State Citizens' Coalition Initiative and National CASA Training Guide
Making Shared Parenting Work

A social worker should facilitate a meeting between the birth parents and foster parents within a week of placement to ensure that the partnership has a strong beginning and is supported by the agency. This requires advance planning by social workers so that both families understand the purpose of the meeting (to discuss the care of the child, not “the case”.)

Every effort must be made to locate any absent/non-custodial parents. Including absent/non-custodial parents early in the shared parenting meetings encourages both parents of the child to become more involved in the child’s life. (Depending on the nature of the relationship between the custodial parent and the absent/non-custodial parent, a separate meeting between each birth parent and foster parent may be necessary).

A meeting site that is a neutral location that allows for privacy is important. Sometimes neighborhood recreation or social centers are good options instead of the agency office.

Tips that social workers can use:

- Ask foster and birth parents at placement how they would like to meet (consider facilitating a conference call or web meeting if distance prevents a parent from attending a face to face meeting)

- Describe shared parenting meetings in positive terms

- Serve as positive role model to foster parents and birth parents
  - Talk positively about birth parent to foster parent
  - Talk positively about foster parent to birth parent
  - Maintain confidentiality
  - Describe foster parent in non-identifying terms at placement

- Brief foster parents on birth parents’ fears and needs and help foster parents understand these needs.

- Talk openly with all about their concerns
- Share information essential to shared parental responsibilities with foster parents and birth parents, i.e., medical information, school progress, goals, and the child’s strengths and needs
Set clear boundaries and ground rules for contact that include input from the birth family, the foster family, and the agency
  o Address personal and emotional safety issues for the child, birth family, and foster family
  o Set ground rules regarding phone calls, visitation, transportation

Assist foster parent/ birth parent in managing conflict
  o Recognize fears of both parties
  o Focus on strengths
  o Look beyond behaviors to identify needs
  o Develop interventions that meet needs

Assist foster parent/ birth parent in understanding cultural differences
  o Cultivate a mutual understanding and appreciation of religious beliefs and practices
  o Openly discuss differences in rituals, family experiences, dress and appearance preferences, etc.

Convey the benefits of aligning around parenting and discipline practices to insure consistency for the child

Facilitate conversations between birth parent/ foster parent
  o Discuss non- threatening topics
  o Find common areas of interest
  o Recognize both families strengths
  o Use of self- disclosure
  o Reflect feelings
  o Encourage exchange of information between birth parent and foster parent, i.e. favorite foods, toys, sleep behaviors, pictures, school progress, etc.

Encourage foster parent and birth parent to attend all school and medical appointments

Encourage the two families to work on the child’s life book together with the child

Encourage the two families to attend parenting classes together

Initiate discussion with families about strategies that they may use that will support the child’s relationship and attachment with both sets of parents in order to avoid dividing the child’s alliance.
**Shared Parenting Topics to Consider for Discussion**

**Hygiene-**
- Prefer Shower/ Bath
- Hair Care (when/ how)
- Dental Care
- Assistance Required?
- Schedule (night/ morning)

**School-**
- Tutoring
- Routine
- Special Needs
- Assistance Req.?

**Medical-**
- Allergies
- Medications
- Appointments
- Immediate Med. Needs
- Vaccinations

**Meals-**
- Favorite Foods
- Disliked Foods
- Food Allergies
- Routine (time/ location)
- Assistance

**Comfort-**
- Comfort Items
- Stuffed Animal
- Blanket
- Ways to Comfort

**Bedtime-**
- Routine
- Storytime
- Schedule

**Fears-**
- Unusual Fears
- Typical Childhood Fears

**Clothing-**
- Style of Dress
- Assistance
- Clothing Not Allowed

**Activities-**
- Favorite Activities
- Prohibited Activities

**Behavior-**
- Reactions to Stress
- Unusual Behaviors?

**Discipline-**
- What Works?

**Routine in Home-**
- Child's Room
- Meals
- Up for School

**Transportation-**

**Other**
Bright Ideas…
SHARED PARENTING:
FOSTER PARENT COMMUNICATION
WITH BIRTH PARENTS

1. Use Reflective Listening when sharing with birth family.

2. Use humility when working with birth families. Another phrase for this is to use the “one-down approach.” Let the birth parent be the knowledgeable one when talking about their child.

3. Understand the anger of a birth parent as a stage of grief.

4. Be careful not to sell yourself as wonderful!
   a. Ask the birth parent questions about their child.
   b. Ask what questions they have for you.

5. Encourage the birth parents to interact with their child at visits. Ask them if they would like the child to bring games or a snack for them to share.

What Social Workers Can Do:

1. Have the movies like “I AM SAM” and “Losing Isaiah” for foster families to watch.
2. Have foster parents train Shared Parenting to other foster parents.
3. Plan with the foster parents on how to talk with the birth family. Have a practice time. Give the foster parents the strengths of the birth family.

J. Scaturro & D. Foster, May 2008
VIDEO OBSERVATIONS
For “Family Forever”

What did you see/hear foster parents do/say that helped support birth families and initiate a relationship with them?

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Family Forever: Reunification Through Family-Focused Foster Care Discussion Guide and Video

Family Forever includes a video tape and discussion guide created to help child welfare systems in their struggle to improve outcomes for families and children. In 1992, The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Family to Family Initiative envisioned, among other system-wide changes, foster care reforms that would focus on changes that supported a more family-focused approach. As part of that reform, Prince George’s County (MD) Department of Social Services developed this training film and discussion guide. The guide gives background information on family-focused foster care, the families featured in the video, the changing roles of the people involved, and gives clear how-to "Steps Along The Way" for each family team member. The video helps illustrate and add fullness to the relationships of birth parents, foster parents, and social workers.

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Boundaries

Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary defines a “boundary” as, “something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent; a separating line.”

- Physical boundaries may include one’s physical proximity to other people, or the use of fences, walls, doors, etc.

- Social boundaries may include a person’s physical proximity to other people; the differences in socioeconomic status between people in communities; age differences between people and generational differences between people.

- Emotional boundaries may include how intimate people are with each other or how much they are willing and able to disclose about themselves.

**Question:** What do you see as the difference between “Defensive Boundaries” and “Shared, Negotiated Parenting Boundaries?”
VIDEO OBSERVATIONS
For “Foster Parents Speak”

What did you see/ hear foster parents do/ say that helped support birth families and initiate a relationship with them?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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What roles can social workers play to support the foster parent-birth parent relationship?

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## Permanency Planning Services: Shared Parenting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Legal Basis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster parents must engage in shared parenting by:</td>
<td>North Carolina Administrative Code 70 E .1104 requires that foster parents shall develop partnerships with the children and their parents or guardians, help children maintain and develop relationships that will keep them connected to their pasts, and help children placed in the home build on positive self-concept and positive family, cultural, and racial identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- developing partnerships with the children and their parents or guardians</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- helping children maintain and develop relationships that will keep them connected to their pasts;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- helping children placed in the home build on positive self-concept and positive family, cultural, and racial identity</td>
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### Protocol – What you must do

Within 14 days of a child being placed out of the home by a county child welfare agency, a shared parenting meeting between the parent(s) and the placement provider must occur.

County child welfare agencies must require shared parenting in all cases where a child is placed out of the home. This includes placement in:

- Licensed foster homes (therapeutic and family foster care);
- Relative and Non-Relative Kinship placements;
- Group home placements; and
- Any other placement in which the county child welfare agency has legal custody of a child and the child is separated from their parent or caretaker.

Foster parents, whether licensed by a private agency or a county child welfare agency, must participate in shared parenting, as this is taught within the Trauma-Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanence Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting- (TIPS-MAPP) training. The 10-week training curriculum is used as a tool in the

### Guidance – How you should do it

The initial shared parenting meeting should be held as soon as possible after the child enters county child welfare agency custody, but no later than 14 days.

Shared parenting and shared parenting meetings can be an intimidating process for both foster and birth parents. Much like Child and Family Team meetings, preparation is the key for shared parenting to succeed. This requires advanced planning by county child welfare workers so all parties understand the purpose of the meeting is to discuss the care of the child, not “the case.” The meeting is not to assign blame. It is first and foremost about creating the best possible transition for the child. Sharing parental responsibilities can be enjoyable activities such as working on the child’s life book together, exchanging pictures, reading with the child, et cetera. They can also plan a joint fun activity that is specifically catered to the child.

When deciding when and where the shared parenting meeting should be held, the county child welfare worker should:

- Take into consideration the work schedules of the foster and birth parents as well as children’s schedules, especially if there is a need for child care while the adults discuss parenting issues; and
Permanency Planning Services: Shared Parenting

mutual assessment of prospective foster and adoptive parents in their ability to successfully provide trauma-informed care for children in county child welfare agency custody.

Before the shared parenting meeting, the county child welfare worker must:

- Be aware that they do not impose their own biases about a birth parent’s previous decisions;
- Model positive communication about the birth parent to the foster parent and about the foster parent to the birth parent;
- Brief the foster parents about any birth parent fears or needs and help the foster parents understand these needs;
- Be prepared to discuss how the needs and interests of the child will be recognized during the shared parenting meeting;
- Plan for if the birth parent may be visiting with the child;
- Make visitation arrangements when the child is visiting with the birth parent before or after the meeting; and
- Encourage the foster parents to engage the birth parents about a positive attribute they see in the child.

The county child welfare worker must prepare the foster parents and birth parents to exchange information essential to shared parental responsibilities between foster and birth parents including:

- medical information;
- school progress;
- sleeping habits;
- eating habits;
- response to discipline; and
- financial information.

- Ask the foster and birth parents where they would like to meet. A meeting site that is a neutral location and allows for privacy is important. The following can be options:
  - A neighborhood recreation center or social center;
  - The library; or
  - A child’s therapist office are good options instead of the agency office.

County child welfare workers should initially focus on items that might seem simple but can be very important such as:

- asking for a picture of the family to have for the child; and
- discussing the child’s favorite foods, toys, clothes, activities, likes, and dislikes.

Both the birth parents and foster parents should be encouraged to talk openly. County child welfare workers should assist foster and birth parents in managing conflict by:

- recognizing the fears of all parties;
- focusing on the strengths;
- looking beyond behaviors to identify needs; and
- developing interventions to meet needs.

County child welfare workers should also assist foster and birth parents in understanding cultural or family differences such as:

- cultivating a mutual understanding and appreciation of religious beliefs and practices;
- openly discussing differences in family rituals such as meal times or where they eat;
- appearance preferences like haircuts, earrings, make up, etcetera; and
- other family experiences.

It is important to convey the benefits of aligning around parenting and discipline practices to ensure consistency for the child. For example, the foster and birth parents might discuss what discipline practices have
**Permanency Planning Services: Shared Parenting**

- any of the children’s strengths and needs.

County child welfare agencies must explore opportunities to (as long as the court ordered visitation/contact plan allows):

- encourage the placement provider to host sibling visits;
- allow the birth parent to call the placement provider’s home; and
- allow the placement provider to participate in the parent/child visitation.

**INVOLVING ABSENT/NON-RESIDENTIAL PARENTS**

Both parents must be engaged and have the right to be involved in shared parenting and the shared parenting meeting. The county child welfare worker must engage both parents in the planning process for the child.

**INVOLVING RELATIVES**

County child welfare agencies must decide whether to include relatives in shared parenting meetings by considering the following:

- Pay close attention to the dynamics between the birth parent and their relative. What is their relationship like and is it healthy toward the development of the partnership between the birth parent and foster parent?
- Consider whether the information the relative would provide is critical to the daily care of the child.

been effective and can be continued or the foster parent may recommend a practice that has been effective with other youth. The child receives consistent structure during visits, when transitioning from one home to the other, and the foster and birth parents are supported in their combined efforts.

If allowable, placement providers should be encouraged to invite birth parents to attend school and medical appointments. If the birth parent is unable to attend an appointment, the placement provider should provide progress reports to the birth parent on how their child is performing in school, home, updates on any medical information, and other activities.

The exchange of information not only helps the placement provider, it helps the birth parent remain connected to the routine of the child’s care.

The placement provider can be a wonderful resource for the birth parent as they can model what others might assume parents know how to do such as play with the child, encourage positive responses in their child, or how to care for their physical and medical needs.

Clear boundaries and ground rules for the contact should be discussed and set with input from the birth family, the foster family, and the county child welfare agency. As it is developed, the Family Time and Contact Plan can be utilized to help with this discussion/plan to:

- address personal and emotional safety issues for the child, birth family, and foster family; and
- discuss ground rules regarding phone calls, visitation, and transportation.

After there is an approved Family Time and Contact Plan that is flexible in allowing the placement provider to convene visits/contacts, at times, the county child welfare agency worker should be involved with observing contact between the birth parent and child. The county child welfare worker is able to personally provide positive feedback on how their relationship is developing.
Permanency Planning Services: Shared Parenting

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Child and whether the information is needed to meet the needs of the child and/or provide support to the biological parents.</th>
<th>A parent that has been referred to as absent or non-residential may have more information than the county child welfare agency may have thought they were able to share in regards to the child’s development. Working to develop an early partnership that includes the absent parent may provide an excellent foundation for them to not only become more involved in their child’s life, but also may be a permanent placement option, and/or a long-term support.</th>
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<td>• Consider the long-term goal of developing a partnership between the foster and birth parents. Would consistently involving the relative in each shared parenting meeting deter from building a partnership between the foster and birth parents or is the relative an excellent mentor and support that would help develop a continued partnership beyond reunification?</td>
<td>The county child welfare worker should:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is the relative able to provide needed information for the care of the child in another way other than being involved in the shared parenting meeting?</td>
<td>• Ask the question: How can the county child welfare agency obtain the absent parent’s involvement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider a discussion with the family that may give the relative other opportunities to be a part of the child’s life/planning such as involvement in child and family team meetings.</td>
<td>• If the birth mother and father have a tenuous relationship, consider facilitating separate meetings between each birth parent with the placement provider.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Be careful not to alienate the birth parent or relative. Make sure all feel heard.</td>
<td>• If one birth parent is unable to travel a long distance for a meeting, consider facilitating a phone conference call or web meeting in order to begin developing a relationship between the birth parent and placement provider.</td>
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CONFIDENTIALITY

It is recognized that placement providers have a need to know medical conditions that a child may have in order to best care for them. Re-disclosure of the information is prohibited without consent of the child, parent or guardian.

County child welfare workers must:

- Avoid sharing information about the birth parents to the placement providers or about placement providers to the birth parents if it is not information that is pertinent to the child’s care.

- Inform birth parents and placement providers of the expectation that information that is shared within a shared parenting meeting remains confidential. Eventually, birth parents and placement providers must be informed that they have the right to receive information about the child’s needs and development to support their decision making.

SAFETY

The safety of the participants should always be considered when planning to begin shared parenting meetings. The county child welfare worker should be aware if there has been a history of domestic violence between birth parents as well as if a birth parent has any history of violence towards others. It would not be appropriate to facilitate or encourage any shared parenting meetings together if there are any court orders including those imposed by probation and parole that do not allow contact between the birth parents. However, it is possible that separate meetings could take place with the placement providers and each individual birth parent at separate times. Document any safety concerns and take steps to ensure the safety of all participants.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>placement providers may come to build a good relationship and choose to share personal information with each other.</th>
<th>concerns. Consider what special arrangements can be made to help everyone feel safe and comfortable such as:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Discuss any questions with your supervisor as well as seek out agency policy around specific situations for the sharing of information. | • Choose a safe location; 
| | • Create specific ground rules and expectations ahead of time together with all participants that are catered to the specific needs; 
| | • If the meeting cannot be held safely, do not hold the meeting; and 
| | • Choose other avenues such as a phone conference call to facilitate the meeting. |
Planning for the Shared Parenting Meeting

1) What issues need to be addressed at the first meeting?

2) How will you prepare the birth parent for the meeting?

3) How will you prepare the foster parent for the meeting?

4) Will the birth parent visit with the children before or after the shared parenting meeting?

5) How will the needs and interests of the child be recognized during the Shared Parenting meeting?
Shared Parenting Implementation Goals

One thing I can do next week to encourage and support shared parenting relationships in my agency is

________________________________________________

________________________________________________

One thing I can do to help birth parents understand the benefits of shared parenting is

________________________________________________

________________________________________________

One thing I can do next week to support foster parents as they learn about shared parenting is

________________________________________________

________________________________________________

One question I have for my supervisor/ team is:

________________________________________________

________________________________________________
Building a positive relationship with birth parents

Foster parents are taught about the things children feel when experiencing loss. We are taught in MAPP about the grief cycle and how to help children through each stage. Yet we are not always taught that birth parents go through their own grief cycle. This is critical information—before we can hope to build a relationship with the birth parents we need to understand how they are feeling.

To give foster parents the tools they need to build more constructive relationships with birth parents, I'd like to share the following suggestions, which are organized according to Charles Horejsi's ideas about the cycle of birth parent grief (see sidebar below).

**Stage: Shock**

At this stage of the grief cycle birth parents need to know their children are being taken care of by kind people who are not trying to replace them. No matter what caused their children to be placed outside their home, parents still care about their children and feel they should be in their care. Foster parents can help by meeting the birth parents face-to-face when children are being placed with them. If a meeting is not possible, call the birth parents after the children are placed. During meetings and phone calls foster parents should:

**Start the conversation.** Do not say “I understand how you are feeling.” This could anger birth parents who feel no one can understand how they are feeling. A better approach would be to introduce yourself by saying, “Karen, I am Donna. I am taking care of your child until he can come home to you. He is missing you. I felt you wanted to know who was taking care of your son.”

---

**Birth Parents’ Grief Process**

**Shock.** Parents are in disbelief. The words people are saying don't sink in or make sense. Parents feel like they are sleepwalking. The only thing on their mind is that their child is gone. Behaviors of parents may include: shaking, screaming, crying, or swearing. They are overwhelmed with worries about their child. Parents may promise the social worker anything without understanding what they promised. Parents may be in denial and are sure the child will return tomorrow.

**Protest.** Grief shows itself more physically. The parents may feel sadness or anger and the symptoms could be upset stomach and low or no appetite. Parents may have headaches, insomnia, and exhaustion. They may be angry at everyone. The parents may make demands or threats. They may swear or cry for no apparent reason. It may be easier to blame others for the situation than to accept their responsibility. This could be a way of coping with despair and depression.

**Adjustment.** In the adjustment phase things start to settle down. Adjustment occurs sooner if the parents have an ally, such as the social worker and foster parent. The parents do not worry about their children's safety or loyalty if trust in the foster parent has developed. The child becomes the focus of the team. Those assisting the birth parents can be the social workers, foster parents, guardian ad litem, therapists and other community resources. The parents build their parenting skills and actively participate in co-parenting their children with the foster parents. The social worker, foster parent, and birth parent develop a strong Shared Parenting team. The parents fulfill their obligations and meet the case plan goals.

Adapted from Charles Horejsi’s “Working with Biological Parents”

Reprinted from *Fostering Perspectives*, vol. 13, no. 1 <www.fosteringperspectives.org>
Be ready for serious anger. Do not let angry words stop your compassion. The birth parents have lost control over their child. They are at a loss as to how to fight for themselves. Demonstrating that you understand this frustration is a first step in the development of trust between the adults.

Stage: Protest
The birth parents may let the foster parents know in no uncertain terms that they are their children’s only parents. They may threaten the foster parents not to harm their children. This is a method of trying to maintain control. Here are some ways foster parents can strengthen their relationship with protesting birth parents:

Assure birth parents you will not harm their children. Birth parents benefit from hearing these words from the foster parents. They may have heard or read scary stories about foster parents.

Be humble. Let the birth parent be the knowledgeable one when talking about their child. Example: “You know your child better than anyone. How do you want me to care for your child while he is here?”

Understand the birth parent’s anger as an expression of grief. Do not show your own anger. Instead, show compassion. This can be difficult if the children have been neglected or abused. Your feelings are your own and should not be overlooked. But as foster parents, you must remember the child loves his or her parents. The plan is almost always reunification. Use your own feelings to motivate and support the birth parents as they learn how to parent their children in healthy ways.

Use Reflective Listening. Birth parents need to be heard, not judged. Reflective listening is the practice of repeating or paraphrasing what the person you are talking to has just said, reflecting back the emotions you are hearing. Example: “I hate that my children are staying with strangers!” Reflective response: “You sound worried that people you don’t know will not know how to care for your children.”

Foster parents’ role is to listen and to provide creative ways for the birth parents to actively parent their children. When they do this, Shared Parenting is taking root.

Don’t sell yourself as wonderful, superior, or the child’s salvation. Birth parents may feel embarrassed or threatened by the foster family’s home. Birth parents may believe foster parents are in it for the money. Birth parents need to hear from foster parents that they are here to help families reunite. Birth parents need to hear again and again that their children need them and that material things aren’t important.

Stage: Adjustment
After birth parents feel recognized by the child’s foster parents they become more open to being involved in the parenting of their children while they are in foster care. Here are some specific ways to communicate to birth parents that they are included in their children’s care.

Ask birth parents what questions they have for you. Birth parents may want to know: Do the children have a room by themselves? Who bathes them? What do you tell them about why they are in foster care? How do you let them know we love them? When can I talk to them? Are you going to change them so that they are more like your family? Do you want to keep our kids?

Ask birth parents about their children. Ask questions such as: How do you want us to take care of them? What do your children like to eat? What allergies do they have? Are they allergic to any medications, mold, animals, etc.? What fears do they have? What do you do to calm them? What do they need with them at bedtime, such as special blankets, pillows, stuffed animals? What are their school needs? Are they close to any teachers, bus drivers, or other family members? Who are they? What do you want the children to call us?

Develop an action plan for parenting the children together. When questions are answered you can, in collaboration with the children’s social worker, develop an action plan that might include phone calls, family-oriented visits at the agency, at parks, and in time, at the foster home. Birth parents can join their children and the foster parents at cont. p. 4
medical appointments, school activities and meetings, church functions, community activities, birthdays, holidays, and summer activities.

When the birth parents are attending these functions, foster parents should introduce them as the children’s parents and ask doctors and school personnel to discuss their children’s needs with the birth parents. This helps the birth parents practice parenting and allows foster parents to play a supportive role.

**After Reunification**

If shared parenting is practiced, the self-esteem of the birth parents is heightened and a positive, ongoing relationship with the foster family created. After reunification the birth parents will most likely desire a continued relationship with the family who cared for their family. The foster parents can offer to take the roles of aunt, uncle, and cousins. They can offer to give respite to birth parents by occasionally caring for the family’s children.

Reunification is stressful. The support of the foster parents can help the family succeed in staying together. Staying involved after the children return home also helps foster families with their own emotions.

A slow transition is healthy for all of the children and the adults who love them. Everyone wins!

*Donna Foster, an author, national trainer, and consultant, lives in Marshville, NC.*

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**Encourage Social Workers to Attend Shared Parenting Course**

The NC Division of Social Services offers a 2-day course for county DSS child welfare social workers that teaches them how to support partnerships between birth families and foster (and kinship) families. Social workers can learn about class times and locations and register for this free training at <www.ncswlearn.org>.

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Reprinted from *Fostering Perspectives*, vol. 13, no. 1 <www.fosteringperspectives.org>
Kim was 12 years old and had been in foster care for some time when she came to live with us. As we got to know one another, I asked Kim why she left her other foster homes, where she had been placed with her sisters. She was very clear: “I wanted to see my Mom and my sisters hated my Mom. I wanted to go home with her and I felt no one there (at the foster home) would help me.”

After hearing her viewpoint of her past life and future plans, I understood why Kim voiced her demands from the start. She wanted to see her Mom, talk about her Mom, and one day, go home to her Mom.

What she didn’t know about me was that, as a foster parent, I believe the stronger the healthy connections are between a child and her birth family, the more resources I have available to help the child.

I never discourage children from talking about their birth families. Understanding their families aids me in understanding the children. If I want to do my part in helping children understand their situations and plan for their futures, there isn’t any room for judgment. Who they are is where they have come from. The people who take part in the growing years of a child make an imprint on the child’s life; they all become a piece of who and what the child becomes.

**Engaging Kim’s Mom**
Kim’s mother was very angry at me and at DSS. She resisted the Judge’s orders: parenting classes, therapy, stable employment, and adequate housing. She had a job and was ready for a larger apartment if the children could come home. But she felt she didn’t need to do the other things.

When I first met her she was forceful and angry. But when I acted in ways to build her trust in me, such as sitting behind her in court to support her and giving her updates on Kim’s daily developments, she mellowed. In time, she did all she was ordered to do. Kim’s mother had a personal disaster which lengthened Kim’s return, but throughout the years, she showed her love to Kim. Kim and I wrote a letter to the
Judge stating our strong support for reunification and listed the factual proof of Kim’s mother’s involvement with her.

In the five years Kim lived with us her mother and my husband and I shared in parenting Kim. Her mother attended all of Kim’s school events, meetings, and church activities. She and I developed the house rules and consequences and we enforced them together. She chose to use the same discipline plan with Kim on her visits home.

Kim’s grandmother stepped forward when Kim’s mother needed a support person to help her raise Kim in her teen years. In the end, Kim, her mother, and her grandmother lived together for two and a half years until Kim went out on her own.

Kim needed this time to reconnect with her family. There were hard times (raising a teen is difficult for any parent) but the good times were wonderful. Kim regained her relationships with her siblings as the years passed. I felt instrumental in aiding Kim on her adolescent journey and we will be there for her throughout her life.

An unexpected benefit to being a foster parent for Kim and working with her birth family was that our two families became one. Kim never felt she had to choose one family over another.

Not all children have happy endings. There are birth families who don’t want to cooperate or are dangerous to their children and others. There are absent parents. There are children who don’t want to reunite.

Even so, there are ways to help children gather information about their families and understand their situation. Time spent helping children fill in their life’s gaps through talking and creating a life book builds a stronger relationship between foster parents, social workers, and the child. In the end, the child wins.

Donna Foster, an author, national trainer, and consultant, lives in Charlotte, NC. This article has been adapted from “The Voice of a Child,” in Fostering Perspectives v. 4, n. 2.

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Some Lessons Only Children Can Teach Us

by Debbie Gallimore

Editor’s Note: This was written in response to Letters from Foster Care

Out of the mouths of babes.

As a former foster parent of ten years, these letters represent the reality that I saw in the lives of the children I fostered.

No matter the abuse or the maltreatment, the children always seemed to have a place for their parents in their hearts. It took me several years before I was able to learn this valuable lesson from them. Children love their parents because they are their parents.

Birth parents are more than what they have done. They are the people who gave life to the children we love. They created the color of their eyes, the texture of their hair, and parts of their souls we can never touch.

This was a difficult reality for me to accept. Nothing in MAPP could have prepared me for this life lesson.

What I didn’t realize for many years is that the more I accepted and honored the birth families of my foster children, the more the children connected with and loved me. It seemed such a paradox. Yet I came to realize that by honoring and loving their families, I was honoring and loving them, too.

For years I underestimated a child’s ability to love more than one mother or more than one father. Once I realized how big a child’s heart could be, I started growing mine. I developed wonderful relationships with birth mothers, birth fathers,
grandmothers, aunts, and cousins. I learned to genuinely care about them because of who they were to the children that I loved so dearly.

One of the definitions of “foster” is “to promote the development of, or cultivate.” In many ways the children that my family and I cared for fostered us. We learned to feel frustration and love, sadness and love, and fear and love. Just like the children, we have the capacity to feel different things at the same time. These letters reminded me of those valuable lessons. No matter the hurt or the betrayal, the human heart has the capacity to love. The longing and void that is created in our children by the loss of their birth families is something we can never fill.

All we can do is love our children.

One way to express that love is to make room in our hearts for the people who gave such amazing gifts to our world. Look between the words of anger and loss and see the love that’s always there. That’s where the hope lies—for all of us.

_Debbie Gallimore is community outreach coordinator for NC Kids._

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Dear Foster Parents . . .

An open letter from Heather, a former foster youth

Dear foster parents,

I have been adopted twice now. I read Debbie Gallimore’s article [in the last issue of Fostering Perspectives] and I do agree with her that if you respect and “take in” a foster child’s family, that child will take you (the foster parent) in. I find this true in my life.

Now that I am adopted for the second time I find it harder to trust and become dependable upon my adopted parents. From a personal experience I will say that it hurts whenever “my” parents talk negatively about my family and I find it harder to respect them afterwards. Our real family is something that was taken from us and we acknowledge that every second of each day. It hurts us worse every time someone mentions our family, it is offensive and your words will never go away.

It is not easy for a child to adapt to a new family. The best way to earn a child’s trust, respect, and dependence is to respect their feeling toward their family.

Most of my life I have been independent and parentless (referring to parental care and guidance), so when I was adopted for the second time “my” parents did not and sometimes they still do not understand why I’m not getting along with them. I am still not used to being able to depend upon anyone and my trust in anyone is gone.

Why? Because that is to me the safest way not to get hurt again. I even find it hard to love or care for “my” new family. I will reject their love to me because it is something I have not yet been able to take in. I don’t care for family time or bonding time because I am very uncomfortable with it. Part of the time these feelings come because of something they had said to me either about me or my family. I do not have my family and I wish to see them all.
I am proud of all my accomplishments that I have made so far in my life. Most of all, I am glad that I did not give up on life even through the hard times when I would’ve rather have been dead.

One of my wishes in life is to be able to be the little girl I once was, when I did not worry how the day would end or if I could ever trust or depend on anyone again. It was a time when I was happy.

I do not write to you to tell you of all my problems that very few know about. I write to say this: what you say and how you treat a foster child does affect them, whether they show you it or not. I cry every night because my heart aches from not being able to be with my family, wondering if they were even alive, wondering what it is like to be held by my real mother. I cry because I feel alone and I feel like something is missing.

Every foster child cries because they are in pain. We want to be held and cared for, we reject it because we are afraid of getting too close to anyone. Please keep this in mind when you have a foster child of any kind in your home because what you do and how you react to a child does make an impact on their lives forever.

*Heather is 16. She received $15 for having her letter published.*
Letters from Foster Care

_Fostering Perspectives_ tries to reflect the voices of people involved in North Carolina’s child welfare system. That’s why, in addition to featuring articles by and about foster and adoptive parents and social workers, every issue features writing and artwork by children who are or have been in foster care. This material usually appears in the middle of each issue.

This time we put the kids front and center. The letters you find here were submitted in response to last issue’s writing contest, which asked the question: _If you could write a letter to your birth parent, what would you say?_

Selecting the contest winners was really difficult. We received many more submissions than we ever have before, and every entry was unique and personal. We were profoundly impressed by the willingness of these young writers to share their fears and dreams with us.

The letters we finally selected for publication in this issue were chosen in part because each reveals something special about the spirit of the person writing the letter. We also chose them because they reflect the different voices of youth in care: some are quite young, others nearly adults. Some have been adopted, others only recently separated from their parents. All these letters address one or more of the central issues faced by those who experience foster care and adoption. Among these are children’s struggle for identity, their anger, and their deep love for their mothers and fathers.

We hope that as you read these letters you will reflect on the perspectives of these children and youth. Think about and celebrate the things you already do to make children’s lives better. Think also about the additional things we all can do to help foster and adopted children heal, grow, and flourish.
Jimmicka, age 10

Dear Mama,

I don’t know where you are and sometimes I’m worried that you are dead. I wonder why you didn’t want to come to our good-bye visit, and why you don’t call our social worker. I feel scared that maybe something happened to you. I love you, Mama. Why did you do this? Why did you make us go into foster care? I wish you had kept us healthy by not giving us too much junk food. I wish you hadn’t let anything hurt us, like the way Anthony hurt Laitsa’s arm. When we were in the hospital for the doctors to fix Laitsa’s arm, I was feeling scared. When Anthony got arrested I was happy.

Mama, I’m sad that we got taken away from you. I want you to be happy, but I don’t think you are happy about me being adopted. I wish you could understand that I am in a good place now with Brigitte and Phil, because they do stuff with us we’ve never done before, and they discipline us, and they love us. Mama I hope that you are in a safe place, not hurt, and not worried. I hope that you are happy. I hope that you know we love you.

Love, Jimmicka

Jimmicka’s letter took first prize, for which she was awarded $100

Lakeisha, age 13

Mama:

... I’m living with this African lady just until the end of the school year, then I’m going back to this lady named Jane.* She is really nice, but don’t worry, she will never be as good as you. And just to let you know, every foster parent I have lived with, I called them by their name and not mama, because I only have one mama, and that is you. I am very proud to be your daughter. . . . Maybe one day me, you, Derrick, and Tony can go to Busch Gardens as a family. DSS is always telling me I am never going to see you again, but I don’t listen to them. They’re just trying to turn me against you, but it ain’t goin’ work. Cause when I turn 18, I’m coming to live with you. I don’t care what anybody says, I’m coming to live with my Mama. See Mama, now I’m 13 years old. I only got five more years until I get to see you. That’s not that
long, is it?

Lakeisha’s letter took second prize, for which she was awarded $50.
*Name changed to protect confidentiality

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Destiny, age 8

Dear Momma,

I feel very, very sad that I can’t see you anymore. I hope to see you one day. You are a very good person. I wish that I could toss a coin and I could wish for anything I want. I wish I could be rich and I wish I could have $100 and I wish I could have a butler. I’d give DSS $100 and then they could give me back to you and we could all live together again. I hope you will be able to see my brothers again. I miss you very much and I love you.

I am a very healthy girl and John and Jane* take care of me. They would never hurt me. I am meeting some new friends at school.

I hope I find a good home when I can be adopted.

When I grow up I want to be a doctor or an author.

Love, Destiny

Destiny’s letter took third prize, for which she was awarded $25.
*Names changed to protect confidentiality.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Audrey, age 12

Dear Daddy,

I haven’t seen you for three years. When I think back on old times, I remember your false teeth and how you looked like a vampire when you would take them out. You would chase us around and act like you were going to bite us, and then you would tickle us. I felt great when you would play with us like that.

You and Mama would always call me your baby. I miss that. I don’t like thinking about when you went to prison. I hope that someday we can see each other again. I hope that you are happy. I am happy sometimes and not happy sometimes.

Love, Audrey

Audrey received $15 for having her letter published

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Desmond, age 18

If I could ask my parent anything I would ask my dad, “Why didn’t you love me?” I feel he tossed me away like an old doll. You didn’t even play with me. I felt like I came from the sky and that is why I am so sour. . . .You make kids like Ford makes cars. I try to get your attention but I still don’t have it. . . . I feel you put others before me when all I ask you for is your time. Time to spend with me. Time to go to a game. I don’t want money. I want a dad, a friend. But I guess you still are not ready to face up to your problems. You give men like me a bad name.

Desmond received $15 for having his letter published

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Alexis, age 15

From “The Letter”
I look up in the stars every night
Hoping that my future will get bright.
Then the next day when I look in your face
You’re still tryin’ to be the same person
That I’m tryin’ to erase.
I don’t want a fake role model,
I want a hero.
Please change back!
If I can’t have a father,
I don’t want a friend.
If I can’t have a dad,
I don’t want an associate.
Friends and associates fade away
Into the background
But a father and a dad
Stays for life.
To whom this may concern:
Give me back my hero.

Alexis received $15 for having her poem published

Madyson, age 13

Mom,

. . . . Because of you I hover over my food and eat it as fast as I can because I think it will be my last meal. I never feel full, either. I flinch and shield myself when people make fast movements around me. I hate being alone and cannot have my back to any closed door.

The worst is the horrible flashbacks and traumatic nightmares about my past. But I kind of want to say thank-you because it made me so much stronger. The only thing that stopped me from dying was myself. Without me I wouldn’t have survived . . .
You may not think what you put me through was wrong, but I do. You just need to know that I do remember and I’ll never forget. But yet after all you put me through for some reason I still love you. I also forgive you.

Sincerely,

Madison

PS: I hope you love me too!

This is exactly what I would write and also, here’s a poem I wrote to her about the way I feel.

**I Still Love You**

Mom, I don’t know why
But every time I think of you
I want to cry.
Mom, I can’t understand why
I love you so.
Even though your love
Would never show.
I think I did wrong by leaving you.
But Mom, why did you leave me too?
Mom, why do I still believe you’re there,
Even though deep inside I know
You don’t really care.
Mom, I want you to care
I want you to be there
Guess my dream will never come true
I just want you to know
Mom, I still love you.

*Madison received $30 for having her letter and her poem published*

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Tim, age 13

Tim received $15 for having his work published

The preceding letters appeared in the printed version of this issue of *Fostering Perspectives*. To read more letters from children who are or have been in foster care, click [here](#). Copyright © 2003 Jordan Institute for Families
Shared parenting benefits everyone—especially foster parents!

by Janine Russell and John McMahon

North Carolina is working hard to increase the amount of contact between foster parents and birth parents.

Agencies are encouraging face-to-face meetings between birth and foster parents within the first week of placement. Social workers are urging foster parents to call birth parents on the phone, to request pictures of the child’s family to display in the child’s room, and to take other steps to bring the presence of birth parents into their homes.

The point of these activities, which are all inspired by an approach to fostering called shared parenting, is not just contact between birth and foster parents, but the development of an actual partnership focused on the well-being of the child.

Certainly, the well-being of children is a strong selling point with foster parents: they care very deeply about children, and few would hesitate to take any action they believed would make the children in their homes healthier, happier, or more secure.

Yet in their efforts to convince foster parents of the value of shared parenting, social workers and others sometimes fail to describe the benefits of this approach for one of the most important players in the world of child welfare: foster parents themselves.

We would like to correct this oversight by exploring with you some of the ways we think shared parenting can make the lives of foster parents better. We will begin by looking at one of the most powerful influences on the behavior of children in out-of-home care: the birth family.

Problems with Family Roles

Most of us would agree that the job of parents is to nurture children, teach them, and raise them to be healthy adults. Likewise, most of us would agree that the child’s job is to
grow, learn, play, and behave like a child.

In most families, the line between these two jobs is clear. However, during times of stress and crisis this line may blur. If the stress is severe enough, for example during a parent’s struggle with substance abuse, the child may begin to assume parents’ roles and to act as an “adult” in the home.

However, children—especially young children—aren’t equipped to worry about health problems, money, substance use, domestic violence, marital conflict, etc. Of course, children rarely tell us in words that they can’t manage adult stress. Instead, they do it through their behavior: some withdraw, others act out.

**Continued Confusion**

When children in this position are placed in foster care, they often have a hard time simply being children. Foster parents offer a safe, stable, loving environment, but the overwhelming responsibility these children have shouldered—caring for mom or dad, caring for a sibling, taking care of themselves—continues to press upon them.

Until the child can trust that someone else will assume this responsibility, his or her ability to do the work of a child—growing, playing, learning—will be undermined, as will the child’s well-being.

**Sorting Out Roles**

One way foster parents can help children let go and become a child again is by working in partnership with the child’s birth parents. When children see harmony among the adults in their lives, they relax and begin to return to the child role. They worry less and spend less time trying to “fix” the adults around them.

Seeing their birth and foster parents working together can change the way children function. Indeed, when they feel supported, birth families will sometimes work with foster parents to give the child “permission” to be OK in the foster home. Over time, it becomes less important to children to defy foster parents so they can prove their loyalty to their birth family. By reducing that division of loyalty, foster parents can gain valuable ground with the children.

**Other Benefits**

Birth parents can also give foster parents precious information and insights about the child. With this information, foster parents may find they can meet the child’s needs earlier in the relationship, and more effectively. This, in turn, can ease their own anxiety and frustration.

How many foster parents have been criticized after getting a child’s hair cut? Through parent-to-parent visits and other shared parenting strategies, foster parents can prevent many misunderstandings and potential conflicts over daily issues.

When they feel supported by the foster parents, birth parents may even back them up. For
example, a child who complains to his birth mother about being put in a child role (e.g., having consequences enforced) may not find such a sympathetic ear if his mother knows the foster parents are taking good care of the child. Shared parenting can give foster parents allies in what may have seemed to be the least likely places.

Finally, shared parenting can sometimes create a bridge between the two families. When the family recovers and the child returns home, lines of communication sometimes remain open. In this way, the foster parent and the child remain “family” despite living in different households, having separate ancestry, and having different blood ties. Isn’t being family what most of us are really looking for?

Foster parents who don’t make children choose their parents will never risk not being chosen. And though they may not verbalize their appreciation, the children will not turn away from you.

Just as parents have love for all of their children, children have love enough to give all of their parents.

### Shared Parenting: Potential Benefits for Foster Parents

Creating supportive relationships and sharing information with birth parents may:

- Enhance child development, learning, and well-being by encouraging the child to return to the child role
- Decrease children’s defiant behavior by reducing the children’s desire/need to demonstrate loyalty to birth family
- Provide information and insights that enable foster parents to meet children’s needs earlier and in a more effective way, thus helping children and reducing foster parent frustration
- Reduce conflict with birth parents over various issues (e.g., grooming)
- Increase birth parent support for foster parents by reassuring them their children are being well cared for and that foster parents do not seek to replace them
- Create a positive connection between the foster parents, the child, and the child’s family that will not have to end, even if the placement does

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Shared Parenting- Appendix
NCDSS rev 10/18

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Works Cited


