

Planning Ahead: Working Together for Successful Interactions

When children are removed from their homes and placed in out-of-home care, it can be a deeply emotional and challenging time for everyone involved. Yet, when caregivers and birth parents come together to provide consistent care, clear communication, and shared expectations, the benefits are profound—especially for the children.

Building a shared parenting relationship might seem daunting at first. However, with thoughtful planning and a commitment to fostering positive interactions between caregivers, birth families, and children, the transition can become much smoother and more supportive for all parties.

Shared/ Co-Parenting

Shared parenting, also known as co-parenting, is when foster parents or relative caregivers create a positive and supportive relationship with the birth parents of the children they are caring for. Healthy shared and co-parenting relationships are built on trust, and building this trust may take some time, and that's okay. It is essential to be patient and practice empathy.

Research indicates that when foster parents or relative caregivers are more accepting,

sensitive, and empathetic towards birth families, the contact between them is much more successful. Additionally, the child feels a stronger sense of belonging to both families. This is the primary goal of shared and co-parenting: ensuring the child's needs are met.

Benefits of Creating Healthy Relationships With Birth Families

Maintaining a strong and healthy relationship with the birth parents of the

children in your care may, at times, feel overwhelming. It can be easy to convince ourselves that a shared parenting relationship will be “too hard” or unachievable with a child's birth family. We encourage you to take some time to reflect on where those feelings may be coming from. It

may help to remind yourself of the many benefits of maintaining healthy relationships with a child's birth family, such as:

- The child's relationship and connection with the birth parent/family can be maintained during their time in out-of-home care.
- Children feel safe, secure, and loved by both families.
- Research shows that healthy shared relationships can minimize children's



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time in out-of-home care.

- Both the child's and the birth family's feelings of grief and loss can be minimized through successful interactions.
- It allows foster parents and relative caregivers to learn the child's routines, likes/dislikes, schedules, sleeping habits, etc., to assist in maintaining consistency and structure while in out-of-home care.
- Caregivers can see a realistic picture of birth parents' strengths and areas for growth to ensure proper support of the child.
- Birth families can see and feel reassured their children are in a safe and nurturing environment.
- It supports and encourages reunification.

Where to Start: Building Trust to Support Positive Relationships

To have a healthy shared parenting relationship, a certain level of trust must be built between the foster parents or relative caregiver and the birth family. This starts with open and honest communication. Here are some tips to get you started.

Comfort Calls. The sooner you can establish contact with the child's parents after the child is placed with you, the sooner you can build trust and create a successful relationship. The child's caseworker should be able to provide you with the birth parent's contact information and the best way to reach out (phone call, text, email, note). If possible, try to make contact within the first 24-48 hours of the child being placed in your home.

This is called a "comfort call," and it:

- Reassures the birth family that their child is safe and cared for
- Allows the foster family and the birth family a chance to introduce themselves
- Creates the time to share critical information (e.g., allergies, food aversions, sleeping habits, fears, preferred names, etc.)

Names. Early in the child's placement in your home, it's a good idea to have a conversation with the child's birth parents about the names they feel comfortable with their child calling you. This allows you all to have a proactive approach and ensure no one's feelings are hurt.

Establishing Guidelines and Expectations. It can be helpful to have a more in-depth conversation with the birth family to ensure clear boundaries and expectations are managed. Some things that may be useful for you to discuss may be communication guidelines, visitation schedules/expectations, roles and responsibilities, necessary appointments, as well as suggestions from counselors/therapists, among any other things that you feel would help to facilitate a good relationship, healthy boundaries, and consistency. It is helpful to involve the case manager to ensure you meet all the established guidelines and hold everyone accountable.

Preparing for and During Visits

After establishing clear guidelines and expectations, being well-prepared for upcoming visitations can help ensure success.

- When possible, try to provide transportation to and from visitations. This ensures that the child does not experience anxiety about getting to the visit. It also demonstrates to birth parents that you value the time they spend with their children.
- Pack up some of the child's favorite toys, snacks, and a fun activity, like a board or card game, to do with their birth family. This allows the child's family to focus on spending time with their child rather than having to come up with an activity.
- Another thing you may find helpful is displaying a calendar in your home. You can structure this calendar based on what's developmentally appropriate for the child in your care. On this calendar,

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you can include upcoming visits, birthdays of birth family members, and anything else you see is essential. This will allow the children to see what is coming next visually.

- Create a shared journal to go back and forth between you and the child's birth parents. In this journal, you can include pictures of activities, updates and projects from school, memorable and funny moments or quotes, and anything else you want to share. Make sure to include space and opportunity for the child's birth family to add to the journal, too.

After the Visit

Many children may have conflicting emotions or feelings after having a visit with their birth family. Be sure to offer them the space to talk openly about how they're feeling, but also don't push them to talk about all the details if they don't feel comfortable at that time. You can always revisit the conversation when the child feels more comfortable talking about it and remain in open contact and communication with any counselors or therapists who may also be involved in supporting the child.

Maintaining a consistent routine can be helpful for kids so that they know what to expect after coming back after a visit. This is why sharing information between both foster parents and birth parents is so important. It allows everyone to be on the same page.

If you have any questions or concerns after a visit, be sure to maintain open communication with the child's birth parents when possible. This allows expectations to remain clear while minimizing any hurt feelings. The parents may also have suggestions to make the transitions after a visit easier for the child.

Caring for a child in out-of-home care is a significant responsibility. When foster parents and birth parents collaborate to

create consistency, stability, and support, the child will feel more secure, safe, and loved. Maintaining a connection with the birth family is crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity for the child. As you navigate this challenging journey, remember that the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here to support you every step of the way.



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Shared Parenting Starts With Strong Communication Skills](#)

Tip Sheets

- [Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First](#)
- [Setting Healthy Boundaries in a Co-Parenting Relationship](#)

Training From Champion Classrooms

- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Let's Talk: Partnering With Birth Parents](#)
- [Co-parenting Through Connection Hybrid Experience](#)

Additional Resources

- [Foster Parent Handbook](#)