

Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First

Imagine your favorite potted plant. Now, picture someone moving that plant to a new pot. Even with fresh soil and water, it might struggle if its roots are damaged. Similarly, when a child is separated from their family, keeping their connections intact is crucial. Shared parenting helps maintain these significant ties while providing the child with the necessary care.

What is Shared Parenting?

Shared parenting means that all the people involved in a child's life—whether they are biological parents, foster parents, kinship parents, or other caregivers—work together to keep the child connected to their family. This teamwork helps ensure the child feels supported and that their relationships with all important adults in their life are respected and maintained.



Toni, an experienced foster parent from Wisconsin, illustrates what shared parenting looks like in practice: “Shared parenting involves opening your home to a child’s family for visits, frequent communication, and making decisions together.” Her experience highlights how shared parenting fosters collaboration and connection between caregivers.

Initial Meeting

When meeting with a child’s family for the first time, try to gather important information about the child from the parents. Parents need to be empowered. They are an excellent resource for gaining insights into the needs and routines of the child in your care. You might also ask if there are others (family friend, mentor, favorite aunt, grandparent, etc.) who

could or should be involved in the parenting or caretaking process.

Why Shared Parenting is Effective

- **Reduces Stress:** Children feel more secure when they see both their families working together.
- **Faster Reunification:** Kids often return home more quickly when shared parenting is practiced.
- **Better Adjustment:** Even if returning home isn’t possible, staying connected with family helps children adjust more easily.
- Discuss the child's specific needs and how to manage them, including care plans, medication, and special rituals.
- Outline specifics such as schedules, roles, and responsibilities. Who will make the doctor’s appointments? Will the child’s parents and foster parents be able to attend parent-teacher conferences? How will the child get to the visits?
- Under the guidance of the agency and professionals overseeing the family’s case, set clear expectations about contact

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frequency and how visits will be arranged. Discuss the family's expectations about contacts and visits within the caregiver's home, birth home, and community. Are weekly visits enough? Are they doable with everyone's schedule? Can the child call the family whenever they want or only at certain times of the day?

- Anticipate disagreements and discuss ways to work together to resolve them.

Building Strong Connections

- **Welcome Visits:** Allow the child's family to visit your home and set boundaries, like keeping bedrooms private. Let the child give the family a tour of shared areas in the house.
- **Encourage Regular Contact:** Support frequent and comfortable visits between the child and their family, either at home or in a neutral location such as a community center, library, school, mall, restaurant, park, etc.
- **Reassure the Family:** Make it clear that you are there to support their child and keep them safe, not to replace them.
- **Keep Them Informed:** Share updates about the child's activities and well-being and provide photos from both home and visits. Take pictures of the child within the foster home and photos during family visits. Give the child's family copies of these photos.
- **Coordinate Appointments:** Work with the family to schedule appointments and make childcare decisions. If possible, ask the parents to schedule appointments for the child or try to accommodate the parents' schedule when setting up appointments. Encourage the parent to participate and have input into decisions about child care, school, medical, extracurricular activities, and religious and cultural events.

Recognizing Strengths

Recognize the parents' strengths and praise

them for their efforts and successes.

Examples include the following:

- "You have good ideas about how to handle Juan's tantrums. I'm glad you shared this with me."
- "I sure appreciate seeing you every week. It helps Juan see that we get along."

Turning negative attributes into positive strengths can be trying. Sometimes, a parent may question the foster parent's quality of care for their child. Turn this into a positive strength by saying, "I can see that you really care about Juan. For his sake, I want to make sure that we agree on what to do next."

You build trust if you respect the parent's strengths.

Handling Setbacks

Be prepared for occasional setbacks or changes in the family's involvement. Keep your caseworker informed about any issues and seek advice from other caregivers if needed.

Strengthening Relationships

Caregivers can promote a healthy relationship between child and parent(s) through communication, attitude, and day-to-day actions, such as:

- Have children draw pictures and write stories or poems for their parents.
- Invite the parent to join the child's favorite activity with the foster family (family bike ride, playing a board game).
- Offer to celebrate special events such as birthdays by inviting your child's family to your home or a restaurant.
- Once a child has been reunified with their family, offer to maintain contact through phone calls and support the family, as approved by the supervising agency.

Caregivers are frequently recognized for helping the children in their care open doors

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so they can fly on their own. Caregivers also have an excellent opportunity to support the family as a whole. As the adage says, “Give your children roots and wings.” Thanks to the many foster parents, kinship parents, and other caregivers who have helped keep those roots intact.

For more information, see [Chapter 4: Developing and Maintaining Family Connections of the Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook](#).



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Listening to Birth Families: Forming Kinship Groups](#), by Northwest Media, Inc. (DVD and Training Manual)
- [Shared Parenting Starts With Strong Communication Skills](#)
- [Birth Parent and Caregiver Partnerships: Working Together to Support Reunification](#)

Tip Sheet

- [Setting Healthy Boundaries in a Co-Parenting Relationship](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Working in Partnership With Birth Parents](#)
- [Let's Talk: Partnering With Birth Parents](#)
- [Let's Talk: Reunification](#)
- [Relational Permanency: The Role of Foster Parents in Supporting Child Relationships](#)