

## Great Foster Parents Work with Birth Family to Aid Reunification

By: Carrie Craft

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### The First Goals of Foster Care Placements Are Often Reunification and Permanency

Family reunification is all about helping a child rejoin his birth family, whether that's birth mom and birth dad or other members of the family, like grandparents. Sometimes foster parents help a child reconnect with other important people from the child's background, which is often called "informal care" or "kinship". This could be a teacher at school or someone else from the community. The ultimate goal in all of this is for the child to achieve permanency, the knowledge that he will not have to move again.

Permanency is about having a forever home and that sometimes means adoption if the birth family is unable to make the needed changes to ensure a safe environment for a child. As foster parents we help the child:

- Maintain attachments and connections that already exist
- Help strengthen bonds with birth family or the foster family (because if a child can attach to you, he is demonstrating the ability to attach)
- Create new connections with those who plan to parent the child, like an adoptive family or an "informal care" placement.

### Mentoring Raises a Birth Family's Chance of Being Successful

We all need someone to look up to. I know I always hug and kiss my child goodnight, because that is what my parent did for me. Some birth parents do not know how to tuck their child in at night or how to read a story to their children, complete with silly voices. That was my mom's specialty.

How can we as foster parents mentor birth family, especially when there may still be some hurt, anger and denial? It may be easier than you think. Your weekly presence and example may be all that's needed to make a difference.

Ideas include:

- Remember school papers and take them to visits so that the child can show birth mom or birth dad
- Talk to the birth family about the child. Ask about fears, allergies, and how they usually do in school. What a great way to empower the birth family and acknowledge that they are the expert on their child. Even if you don't agree with their assessment, the act of asking may mean a lot to some birth parents.
- Bring items to visits that celebrate and mark the child's growth and development. This may include artwork, school pictures, and other craft items.
- When appropriate according to the team, invite birth parents to attend different meetings and appointments with you. Remember parent teacher meetings and doctor appointments can be great mentoring opportunities.
- Work on child development milestones with the birth parents. This may include potty training, first steps, or even working on math facts with older children.
- Discipline techniques can be gained when the birth parents watch how you interact with the child. I've had a birth mother talk to me about how she handled an argument during a visit with her sons, and then ask me if she handled it properly. Showing that you're open for communication may open doors.
- Pack a meal or snack for a visit. This allows the birth family to see what you have brought to share.

It sometimes is difficult, especially when we know how a birth parent may have abused or neglected a child we have grown to love. Consider focusing on hating the act and not the person. In many cases the birth parents were abused and neglected too.

## **Transitioning a Child Back Home or into an Adoptive Placement**

As foster parents we can help a child reunify with birth family or transition into an adoptive home. Here are some ideas to help with that process:

- Speak positive words about the upcoming move in front of the child. Look for strengths in the birth family or adoptive home. If you are struggling with the move, be sure to share your concerns or take your venting time out with friends and away from the foster child's ears
- Add pictures of the child's family in their bedroom
- Create a lifebook for the child, and keep it updated, especially before the move
- Keep the foster child and the birth parents informed on the details of the transition. If transitioning into an adoptive home, keep the adoptive family in the loop as well
- Make sure all are informed on how the child is doing with the upcoming move
- If possible, advocate for a slow and steady transition that involves a few short visits and a few weekend visits, before the actual move date
- Participate in foster care team meetings
- Remember to celebrate the child's time in your home with a party or special outing

## **A Bit of Reading and Reflecting**

### **Reading**

Read our article on "How to Handle First Meeting Birth Family". I can think of few other occasions when a foster parent, especially a new foster parent, is the most stressed. Also read "Foster connections with the Whole Family".

### **Reflecting**

Spend some time reflecting on how you typically interact with birth family. Start now with a promise to yourself that you are not going to say negative things about your foster child's birth family, or adoptive family, especially within hearing of the child.

Make a plan, how are you going to extend a mentoring relationship? Evaluate if it's appropriate to do so at this time.

If you meet with some resistance from the birth family, continue to be respectful and silently teaching with your presence. It doesn't have to be a "in your face" formal teaching moment. A great example says a lot.

You're off to a great start toward being a great foster parent!