

Redefining 'Family': California

This publication was developed by Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative in collaboration with the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership and the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, with support from Casey Family Programs.

The words that Ventura County foster parents Jackie and Daniel Mesa live by are warm and welcoming, and perfectly encompass their past three years: "The minute we receive the baby, you (the birth parents) are family. Period," Daniel says.

The Mesas have been caregivers in several ways for as long as they can remember. Growing up as the oldest child of seven, Daniel helped his mother raise the younger six, was a youth football and baseball coach for a total of six years, and now works as a non-emergency EMT; Jackie has served as a caregiver for her mother and raised four biological children. The couple began the process to become foster parents in 2019 for children 24 months and younger. Since then, they've been the caregiving family for eight children.



Jackie and Daniel Mesa with their family.

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– Judy Webber, Deputy Director
Ventura County Children
and Family Services

There are plenty of ways that the Mesas show trust and caring towards the biological families of the children they care for. The techniques the Mesas model in their parenting are grounded in the expectations of the Ventura County child welfare agency's Quality Parenting Initiative practice model, developed over a decade of working with QPI's national movement for foster care change committed to ensuring that all children in care have excellent parenting and lasting relationships so they can thrive and grow.

Each agency participating in QPI localizes its training and practices to best achieve the goal of prioritizing children's relationships. Ventura County child welfare agency leadership has embedded support for caregivers caring for biological families in all layers of agency practice, says Deputy Director for Ventura County Children and Family Services Judy Webber.

"Our work is not only about strengthening or focusing just on kids, it's about family empowerment and having caregivers walk alongside and support our families on their journey to reunification," Webber says.

For example, Ventura County was one of the first counties in California to launch a caregiver recruitment campaign appealing to caregivers excited about playing a role in unifying and strengthening families. To make those values concrete, QPI caregivers in Ventura County periodically sign a Partnership Agreement during their Resource Family Approval process (<http://www.qpicalifornia.org/documents/systemDocs/FosterVCKidspartnerhsipplanFINAL.pdf>), ensuring that families and staff share common expectations that children thrive when they remain connected to their birth families, so agency staff will support the caregivers in that process.

Ventura caregivers also learn in trauma-informed pre-service training and through ongoing support from staff and experienced peers, called “peer partner educators,” to incorporate additional practices into their parenting and relationship-building with birth parents, including comfort calls, asking questions, using reflective listening, encouraging questions, expecting resistance, planning for visitation and activities, being positive, building on strengths, maintaining contact, and preparing for setbacks. Peer partner educators are a particularly innovative Ventura practice, as the availability of support from resource parents who are experts at forming relationships with birth parents and utilizing co-parenting practices is critical. The impact of these practice changes is illustrated by the Mesas’ experiences.

Comfort calls

A cornerstone QPI practice adopted by Ventura County is the comfort call. A comfort call is a call facilitated by Ventura County agency staff, made when the child arrives at their placement, between the resource family (caregiver) and birth parent. The call is intended to help the foster parent be equipped with all necessary information to help the child be as safe and comfortable as possible, to ensure that the birth parent knows that their child is safe, and to help the child understand that their biological parent is okay.

In the Mesa household, Jackie generally takes the comfort calls.



Comfort calls help birth parents, foster parents, and kids.

“You have to let (the birth parent) know: We’re doing this to reunite you with your child,” Jackie says. “We like to ask right when we meet them: What are you afraid of? And the mom usually says, ‘that they’re not going to know me.’ So I try to give them hope right at the beginning. I like to say, “I can’t wait to be in court with you in a year, year and a half, when that gavel comes down: case closed.”



Jackie and Daniel Mesa

"It did give me a sense of being at ease that even though my son wasn't with me, I knew I didn't have to worry about him when he was with Jackie and Daniel. I missed him, but I didn't have to worry that he wasn't getting fed or crying without anyone paying attention."

– Vanessa

Planning for visitation and activities

Following a comfort call, the next step in the QPI Ventura model is a meeting to facilitate contact between the birth parent and caregiver in the first 14 days of a child's placement. The meeting may be held in a home, office or virtually.

Birth mom Vanessa first met Jackie and Daniel, who were caring for her newborn son, on the fifth day of his placement in January 2020. By the meeting, Vanessa was determined to regain custody of the baby and had resolved to get through the required recovery programming needed to do so. She held her son during the entirety of the meeting and remembers how difficult it was to say goodbye to him at the end. She thanked Jackie and Daniel for taking care of her baby "as (she) tried to get back on (her) feet again."

"It did give me a sense of being at ease that even though my son wasn't with me, I knew I didn't have to worry about him when he was with Jackie and Daniel. I missed him, but I didn't have to worry that he wasn't getting fed or crying without anyone paying attention," Vanessa says. "That made me feel good, and I know it was the same for my boyfriend (Johnny, the baby's father), too."

"In QPI, you have to be a team player: It's not about me, it's about us. It's, 'What can we do as a group to help this person?'"

– Jackie



Vanessa stayed in touch with her baby by way of a daily phone call.

"We like to establish the importance of being there for the parents at the beginning," Jackie says. "In QPI, you have to be a team player: It's not about me, it's about us. It's, 'What can we do as a group to help this person?'"

As Vanessa worked through her treatment program, she was able to stay in touch with both her baby and Jackie. "Jackie gave me her number and told me I could call anytime to check on the baby, even though he couldn't talk – it was just cooing or crying – but just to hear how the day went," Vanessa said. "So I called every single day."

"I'll send the mom photos of the baby daily," Jackie says, while Daniel is generally in touch with the baby's father.

Maintaining contact

Over several weeks, as Vanessa progressed through her program, the visits Vanessa was allowed with her baby increased. In most cases, a case aid brings a child to visit their birth parent, but Jackie frequently accompanied the baby herself, often bringing along extra treats in the baby bag. Once Vanessa mentioned that she'd never bathed the baby herself, Jackie showed up for their next meeting with a baby bath. For the next several visits, Vanessa bathed him.

"Moms always call me for advice: what to do if their baby has a fever, if their baby's pajamas are too small, or if they don't know what to do," Jackie says. "We have an open line of communication. Our phones are always on for calls and Facetime."

Daniel adds that he and Jackie lean on their peer partner educator, as well. "She's like our 911 resource," he says.

In March 2020, about six weeks into Vanessa's baby living with Jackie and Daniel, covid-19 canceled in-person visits, so they switched to twice-weekly Zoom visits. "The reception was always horrible, but Jackie was always there to do the Zoom," Vanessa says.



Vanessa and her son kept in touch with time spent together both in-person and Zoom.

Building on strengths

Soon after, Vanessa graduated from her treatment program. Her next step was to complete a stay at a sober living home. Jackie picked up Vanessa and her things from the treatment program and drove her to the sober living home, stopping along the way for a bite to eat. The next day, Jackie dropped off some groceries for Vanessa.



The Mesas had Vanessa and Johnny over for July 4.

"I didn't ask her – she just asked me how I was settling in, and I'd told her the girls were sharing their food with me. The things I didn't have – she made sure I had them. She just did those things on her own, and that was really nice," Vanessa recalls. "And she'd brought the baby with her, so I got to see him a little bit extra."

"It all goes back to trust," Jackie says. "Everyone makes mistakes – let's start with a clean slate."

Daniel agrees. "We want (the parents) to feel as comfortable and as safe as they can, and be reassured that their child is safe," he said. "The system looks at people as numbers, but we want people to understand, we don't – you're family. I don't want a stigma on anybody."

As winter turned to spring and spring turned to summer, Vanessa worked through the sober living required for her to gain back custody of her son, and her boyfriend Johnny got started on his, as well. Jackie and Daniel invited Vanessa and Johnny to visit their baby individually, then soon enough, together, as a family of three.

"I thought it was really nice that (Jackie) would let me hang out in her house. She didn't know me enough to do that, but she did," Vanessa recalls. Both sets of the baby's parents grew closer, and Jackie and Daniel invited Vanessa and Johnny to a July 4th barbeque, complete with grilling and watching fireworks.

"We were able to spend our baby's first 4th of July with him," Vanessa says. "And Jackie and Daniel made sure we got back to our places in time (before curfew)."

During these visits, Vanessa could see that her baby was loved by even more of Jackie and Daniel's family. "Jackie's daughters are always holding him, or her grandson would be playing with him. They all love him," Vanessa says.

Jackie also went above and beyond to connect the infant with his own family members, as well. Jackie knew that Vanessa had a teenage son who was also in care at the time, so Jackie got a hold of the older son's social worker to arrange a visit between the two brothers.

"I thought that was so awesome," Vanessa said.

The visit went well – the brothers got to spend time together, and the older brother became good friends with Jackie and Daniel's teenage son.



Jackie arranged for Vanessa's infant and teenage sons to spend time together.



After reunification, the two families continue to spend time together.

Continuing relationships after reunification

Vanessa and Johnny completed their sober living requirements, the cases of both the baby and the teenage son were closed, and the boys moved back home in autumn 2020. But the connection between the two families is far from finished.

"We blend them into our family. We stay connected," Jackie says.

"We go swimming together in the summertime; we have birthday parties," Vanessa says.

Daniel adds, "They bring us gifts; we have Sunday dinners; we babysit. Our family just gets bigger and bigger – our own little community."

Vanessa and Johnny's son – now a toddler – can be found grinning in photos on Jackie and Daniel's "love wall," a montage of dozens of photos of babies who the couple has cared for over the years. His photo is posted there not solely as Jackie and Daniel's foster child, but also as their godson.

"It's so good to have somebody like that in my life and in my baby's life," Vanessa says. "They care for and love him, and I'm pretty sure they feel the same way about us."

Goals for the future

Three years into their journey as caregivers, Jackie and Daniel have big dreams for the future.

"We're blessed with what we have: a two-bed condo," Daniel says, "but we can only accommodate two kids. So our goal is to find a bigger place with space for more beds and cribs, and to make a difference." With more families needed to care for children in foster care, the need is there, especially in the midst of the fentanyl crisis, he adds. Daniel notes that while arrangements are regularly made to ensure children can attend visits with their birth parents, a lack of transportation for the birth parents can be a major barrier to them getting to those visits, so easily accessible transportation for birth parents is an important community need.

The Mesas can be so busy engaging with their always-growing family, they sometimes find themselves putting off appointments, and they recently forgot their anniversary. "But it's worth it for me when I see him (a toddler we're taking care of) walk from our couch to the door and want me to pick him up," Daniel says. "In the end, it's all about the kids."

Jackie and Daniel Mesa were two of 22 people nationwide to be honored for their outstanding work as foster parents with the QPI Elevate and Celebrate Award 2022.



The Mesas' family continues to grow.

Practical resources & Additional reading

For system leaders

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership:

A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sec3f22c53ca04100a128ff2369207b82>)

For parents and caregivers

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership:

A Relationship Building Guide offers practical tips to help build partnerships and strengthen communication between the important adults in a child's life while in care and after.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sfbf4965b0cb04a4cb3aee4a034aa2042>)

For case workers

A one-page "user's guide" for how child welfare agency leaders and staff may consider introducing and using the guide.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/s0a552c5927fb4fc39b63ea0cea553ab8>)

