

Policy to Practice Implementation: Florida

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In the Quality Parenting Initiative's quest to ensure that every child gets the excellent parenting they deserve, the work often involves the transformation of policy from being text on a page into being real change on the ground.

Since 2008, the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) has implemented extensive reforms over Florida's foster care system since more and better parenting was desperately needed for children and young people. QPI Florida began their focus on improving foster parent recruitment to ensure qualified individuals are caring for children, expanding its efforts to ensure that youth, foster, and birth parents have a greater voice within the foster care system, which meant that child welfare agencies began relying on the feedback of their lived experience to reform recruitment, licensing, and placement policies and practices.

Parents and children were encouraged to participate in administrative and steering committee meetings to address system reform needs. They also helped lead pre-service training for incoming foster parents, became involved in forming mentor programs to provide support and guidance to other young people and families who were navigating the foster care system.

In 2020, the Florida legislature passed HB1105, a bill to "require planning for and monitoring of communication between foster parents and biological parents at various stages in the dependency process to encourage a productive working relationship, including meaningful communication and mutual support."

The Quality Parenting Initiative has been working with involved agencies and parties to implement the bill's measures in the best possible ways for families and children.



Victoria Camper

Victoria Camper is a parent and child welfare worker in Florida, who joined the Youth Law Center in 2020 to work as a site support advocate for QPI. Victoria is also involved in the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, a national collaborative, where she works alongside parents and caregivers to create a relationship-building guide resource for families engaged with child welfare. Victoria has extensive experience as an advocate for birth parents, and helped birth parents in Volusia County, Florida navigate the child welfare system as a Parent Partner for five years before coming to QPI.

She continues to support birth parents to become more involved in agency, program, and policy development. Part of her role as a QPI site support advocate includes working with circuit courts throughout the state to develop protocols to align with new measures; design and facilitate relevant training for involved parties about evidence-based parenting techniques; and helping communities engage birth parents in every step of the processes via birth parent advisory councils, mentoring groups, and working groups.

"The mission of my position is to make sure that the voices of birth, foster parents, and children are heard," Victoria says. In each group and training she facilitates, Victoria brings her own lived experience as a birth parent working through a case plan and the shared experiences of the birth parents she's worked with since.

One focus of the new state law is to support respectful, collaborative partnerships between birth parents, caregivers, community-based care lead agencies, and the Department of Children and Families to create a successful team supporting the child. Key to starting the partnership between birth parents and caregivers off right is a comfort call: a phone call between the birth parent and caregiver in the hours after the child is placed with a foster home. These calls cover the information that caregivers need to know to provide the child with the best care possible, and the information that birth parents need to share. This can range from information about a child's health conditions, medications, or dietary restrictions to their favorite foods, books, and television shows and their name for their security blanket.

"Those things don't always get transferred from the birth parent to the investigator; those are the things that fall through the cracks (without a comfort call), and the birth parent is burning to communicate those things," Victoria says. "This call sets the foundation for a relationship between the birth and foster parent."

"(A comfort call is) making sure a child is comfortable on what is most likely going to be their hardest night ever."

- Victoria

Comfort calls are also crucial in providing information that helps the child transition as easily as possible into the caregiver's home.

"When a comfort call takes place, there's normalcy, less anxiety, and less of a disruption that goes on (for the child)," Victoria says. "It's making sure a child is comfortable on what is most likely going to be their hardest night ever." Leading up to the new law, birth parents – nearly all of whom had not had the opportunity to make a comfort call with their child's foster parents – were invited to give testimony about how they think a comfort call would have affected their case.

"Everyone was in tears (in reflecting on how much healthier that transition could have been)," Victoria says. But one birth parent in the group had been able to talk with their child's foster parent during that transition, and that foster parent had made a habit of maintaining regular contact throughout the child's stay in the foster home. When this child returned home to the birth parent, the birth parent and child's relationship was still intact.

"From there, DCF decided they were going to bring comfort calls to our area," Victoria recalls.



Comfort calls help children, birth and foster parents adjust to their new living situation.

"Children in foster care have a tendency to try to not hurt the other parent's feelings, but knowing that the parents know each other takes the pressure off of them."

- Victoria

Comfort calls had already been taking place in some areas, but this decision refreshed and standardized the process. Victoria's next step was to co-facilitate a training about comfort calls for the investigators who'd be facilitating those calls between birth and foster parents.

Now, with the requirement of comfort calls in the state, Victoria reflects on how the calls have made a difference.

"This is how it appears to me: (comfort calls) are starting to change the culture," she says. "Two years ago, the birth and foster parent never met each other, usually – maybe just in court. Now, the two parents have a relationship there."

Victoria points out that the existence of a meaningful relationship between birth and foster parents positively affects not only the parents but the child as well. "The children (know that the parents have a relationship, so they have) less divided loyalties. Children in foster care have a tendency to try to not hurt the other parent's feelings, but knowing that the parents know each other takes the pressure off of them," she says.



A meaningful relationship between a child's birth and foster parents has many benefits.

This all sets the stage for another focus of the new law: case managers having the responsibility to support parent partnerships in several ways, including developing and supporting plans for the birth parents to participate in the child's medical appointments, educational and extracurricular activities, and other events.

"Because the case manager is nurturing this relationship and facilitating opportunities for this relationship to build, it feels like a team effort (among all parties)."

- Victoria

"This used to look like the case manager talking with birth and foster parents separately," Victoria says, "which, from the birth parent perspective, sometimes appeared to be an alliance (between the foster parent and the case manager). But now, because the case manager is nurturing this relationship and facilitating opportunities for this relationship to build, it feels like a team effort (among all parties)."

Beyond the birth parents being more present for quality time with their child, in this system, birth parents also have the opportunity to be engaged in important conversations about their child's life. "This is what relationship-building looks like: birth and foster parents having conversations and making decisions together," Victoria says. "Every relationship looks different, but with this tool, the foster parent notifies the birth parent (about important events) and asks their input about how they should move forward."



In QPI, birth and foster parents have conversations and make decisions together.



Technology can help birth and foster parents maintain communication.

"When you give somebody a picture of what things look like in the home, it gives them an idea of what their children are experiencing on a day-to-day basis, and it takes the pressure off, so they can focus on themselves."

- Victoria

For example, if during a child's stay in the foster parent's home, the child has an issue at school, the foster parent may call the birth parent and talk through the next steps.

"Foster parents are also letting birth parents know what systems and consequences they're implementing in the (foster) home so that the birth parent can support the foster parent in that," Victoria says. "Birth parents want it to be, 'We're on the same team, and we're working together to make the best decision.' They don't want it to be, 'When you're with me, all bets are off.'"

Victoria also notes the team dynamic sets the stage for opportunities for foster parents to demonstrate healthy parenting techniques in real-time. "(The communication and relationship-building) empower foster parents to mentor birth parents about quality parenting. Foster parents didn't feel empowered to do that before. They'd wanted to, but they didn't feel empowered to," Victoria says. She cites one foster mom who now regularly invites a birth mom to join the family grocery shopping. During that quality time together, Victoria sees the foster parents feeling empowered to give gentle advice about how to parent in positive ways.

"When you give somebody a picture of what things look like in the home, it gives them an idea of what their children are experiencing on a day-to-day basis, and it takes the pressure off, so they can focus on themselves," Victoria says. Eventually, in many circumstances, these provisions all lead into another final focus of the new law: once the child returns home to the birth parent, continued contact between the foster parent and child is supported.

"This is probably the most beautiful part," Victoria says. "The birth and foster parent now have this relationship where there's concrete support." So, after a child's reunification with the birth parent, if the child gets sick at school and the birth parent has trouble leaving work early to pick them up, the birth parent may call the former foster parent to ask for that support.

"If a child is placed in foster care, it means that the birth parent didn't have any positive social connections that can help in those situations," Victoria says. "Everybody needs a village, and this creates the supports the birth parents need to be successful." This continued relationship between the foster and birth families after reunification is also often the happiest, healthiest path forward for the child. "It means the child isn't losing this person they've lived with and formed a relationship with," Victoria says. "It means they have another person to love them."

Victoria will continue studying the changes taking place in Florida's foster care system and will continue inviting birth parents into the conversations informing these procedures and policies. "We've come so far, but there's so much still to do," Victoria says. However, ensuring children have the love they deserve is indisputably worth the effort.



Victoria Camper and a colleague at a community festival.

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>)

