

# Changing the Culture: Louisiana

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*Erik and Kara spent the early years of their marriage building their careers and raising their family. The demands of parenting their four young children kept the couple on the go, but as time passed and their kids grew older and more independent, they began thinking that perhaps they could take on more.*

Going into their first foster parent training session, the couple had different ideas of the age group they would welcome into their home. Kara envisioned snuggling a baby, while Erik pictured an older child. After their initial training, that changed. Deeply moved and eager to continue with the program, the two agreed there would be no age restrictions for any child joining their family.



*Erik, Kara and their children.*

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- Kara

Soon after the training, Kara received a call about a little boy, Grayson, who was in the pediatric intensive care unit. The medically fragile infant had complex injuries and needed caregivers at the hospital with him. Kara discussed the decision with Erik. They prayed on it and the couple's youngest son urged his parents to go for it. "Mama, we have to. We have to do this."

Finally, Erik voiced the words that would lead to their first placement: "Tell [the case worker] yes."

Kara's first instinct was to reach for the phone and call Grayson's mom, Natalie. "I just wanted to connect. I felt this need to know who his mom was," Kara said. Approaching with empathy and respect, that initial conversation created a space where Natalie felt safe from judgment and laid the groundwork for a healthy relationship between the two families. "Our first experience was one of reaching out to her and respecting her as his mom, because she is, and giving her that respect and not having any kind of judgment. It just led to a natural Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)."

Child welfare leadership adopted QPI as a system reform in 2016, and began to re-orient the child welfare system to prioritize birth and foster parent relationships and support. They provided trauma-informed training to staff and implemented new policy changes to include initial (also known as comfort) calls and early icebreaker meetings between caregivers and parents. Initial calls require agency staff to call birth families from the foster home as soon as the child is placed there, both to reassure them their child is safe and to learn more information about their child.

During these calls, birth families share critical information with foster families that both help protect the child's safety and health (such as allergies, health conditions, and medication) and ease the trauma of removal and disruption for the child (including sleeping routines, favorite foods and fears). This information enables foster parents to begin meeting the child's needs immediately and forms the foundation of a working child-centered relationship between parents. Relationships were found to improve throughout the state. Social workers supported this movement, and a cultural shift occurred within departments which was exemplified by increasing support for comfort phone calls. As families worked together to care for children, social workers saw support for children increase and their workload decrease.

Agency leaders created regular opportunities to communicate the QPI vision of prioritizing relationships with staff and parents and aligned staff expectations and performance evaluations to reinforce the culture. Agency leaders prioritized regular efforts to listen to and work with both birth and foster parents. This allowed them to identify and address challenges, learn from what was working well, and ensure changes were being implemented successfully.

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Court leadership also was key in the systems changes that supported the foster and birth families to develop a meaningful, child-focused relationship. The courts implemented specialized QPI training for court stakeholders to provide information about the research underlying the parent partnership approach and how court practice impacts partnership outcomes. As judges changed their expectations and support for the partnership, they too became agents of culture change.

These changes that involved buy-in and commitment at all systems levels and clear directives and support for staff and families created the cultural environment that has changed Grayson's future as the people who love him work together.

In addition to scheduled visitation, and regular updates and photos sent through Messenger, Kara and Erik make an effort to incorporate Natalie in Grayson's milestone events, including his first birthday last June. The couple planned a small get-together and included on the guest list Grayson's biological sibling, whom Natalie hadn't seen since birth.



*Grayson's first birthday party was a success.*



"We have the room, there's no reason we can't do it. I love doing this. I will help!"

- Kara and Erik's youngest son

To make the day as special as possible, Kara and Erik involved her, as much as she was comfortable, in the day's festivities and Kara took plenty of photographs.

"I have pictures of her glowing. Smiling. It was a treasure of a memory," Kara says. The party turned out to be more meaningful than Kara and Erik expected when they later found out that it was the first birthday party Natalie had been allowed to attend for any of her children.

On another visitation day, instead of hanging out at DCFS, Kara and Natalie left the office and had a day out. This type of activity further supports QPI in building relationships. They all went to breakfast and brought Grayson to the park. It was an opportunity for them to talk and connect on a deeper person-to-person level. Natalie opened up about her past experiences and traumas and hearing her story in her own words granted Kara a better understanding of Natalie and gave her a chance to acknowledge the other woman's pain.

Last July, Erik, and Kara received another call from children's services. Jeremy, a substance-exposed, malnourished, almost six-month-old was in need of a medical placement. Hesitant at first to take on something permanent, and unsure if they could handle two babies at the same time, their youngest son once again urged his parents to bring the little one home: "We have the room, there's no reason we can't do it. I love doing this. I will help!"

The situation with Jeremy's biological mom, Stephanie, is different than Grayson's. Kara tried to establish a relationship early on with Stephanie. Their initial three-hour meeting went well, but subsequent attempts to reach out have mostly gone unanswered. One of the few times they were able to connect, Kara took the opportunity to reassure her that they weren't there to take Jeremy and that the end goal is always reunification. When she said that, she could hear Stephanie's voice brighten.

Despite the difficulty engaging with Stephanie, following the principles of QPI with a goal of strengthening the foster parent and birth parent relationship, Erik and Kara continue to keep the lines of communication open, encourage her to work her case plan, and offer support.

Recognizing the importance of maintaining familial bonds, they also independently facilitate visits in their home with Jeremy and his half-sister.

Erik and Kara's dedication to preserving the biological family's relationship with the kids they foster is part of their commitment to QPI, and the families they serve. Kara, as a mother, is particularly dedicated to the process.

"She's his mom. Nothing can break that bond. He will always know who she is. That is a relationship that is fundamentally important and needs to be respected and nurtured."

- Kara

"She's his mom. Nothing can break that bond. He will always know who she is," Kara says. "That is a relationship that is fundamentally important and needs to be respected and nurtured. And even when her life isn't in a place for it to be more connected, I want him to only know love in that relationship. Between her and me, and between him and her," Kara says. "Because my hope is that when she gets to a place in life and wants to have a relationship, the ground will be laid for him to have a healthy, loving mindset, knowing that she loves him no matter what."



*Kara and Erik consider the children they care for part of their family.*

Until that time, Grayson and Jeremy are thriving in their foster home and both the boys and their biological parents are considered family by Erik and Kara. As Kara says, "I treat these children as my own and I want to include their family as our own as well... I've always said that in our story, I never want reunification or adoption to mean losing a family, but rather gaining one."

# 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>)

