

BIRTH AND FOSTER PARENT PARTNERSHIP:
A State and Local Leader's Guide
to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation



JUNE 2020

Acknowledgements

A publication of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, created with parents, in collaboration with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative and Casey Family Programs.



Youth Law Center is a public interest law firm that works to protect children in the nation's foster care and justice systems from abuse and neglect, to ensure they receive the necessary support and services and maintain ties to their families and communities whenever possible so that they become healthy and productive adults. The Quality Parenting Initiative is Youth Law Center's approach to strengthening foster and kinship care.

<http://www.ylc.org>



Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is an approach to strengthening foster care, refocusing on excellent parenting for all children in the child welfare system. QPI is creating a movement to transform foster care through a network of families, youth, agency leaders, judicial leaders, agency staff, and community organizations committed to developing and sharing results-based solutions, advocating for and implementing policy and practice changes, and changing the culture of child welfare to focus on the QPI goal of excellent parenting for every child and youth in care.

qpi4kids.org



Children's Trust Fund Alliance is a membership organization that provides support to state children's trust and prevention funds and strengthens their efforts to prevent child maltreatment. The Alliance members invest more than \$200 million each year in prevention strategies for families. The Alliance also works with national partners, state organizations, parents, federal agencies and others to impact policies, practices, systems changes and trainings. Through the Alliance National Parent Partnership Council and the Birth Parent National Network, the Alliance has elevated the voice of parents and others with life experience in child maltreatment.

ctfalliance.org



Birth Parent National Network (BPNN)

Birth Parent National Network (BPNN), is a national platform for birth parents to work in partnership with organizations and policymakers to share their life experiences and make recommendations to improve policies and practices that impact children and families. BPNN's goal is to strengthen and support families and improve outcomes for families at risk or involved with the child welfare system. The dynamic network includes hundreds of parent and organizational members. To make a difference locally, in your state or at the national level, join the BPNN.

ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn



Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America. Casey Family Programs works in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and two U.S. territories and with more than a dozen tribal nations to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families and the communities where they live.

<http://www.casey.org>

Purpose and Content Overview

This guide shares lessons learned about culture, practice, and policy transformation from Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)¹ jurisdictions that have been working to implement system changes to prioritize relationships and support co-parenting. It is directly informed by the expertise of parent leaders from the national Birth and Foster Parent Partnership² movement. It describes practices and policies that support strong birth and foster parent partnerships and shares tips for successful implementation. The information and tips included here reflect the lessons jurisdictions are learning as they listen to parents, change policies and practices, and shift agency culture

to prioritize quality parenting. They also reflect direct feedback and suggestions from birth parents and foster parents who have co-parented successfully and who have learned from their own experiences.

While this guide is primarily intended for use by child welfare leadership at the state and local levels as a general blueprint for change, the resources and recommendations contained here can be useful as a model and source of inspiration for any stakeholder in the child welfare system—birth parents, frontline child welfare staff, youth, foster parents, and others—to advocate for change in support of birth and foster parent partnerships.

-
- 1 For more information about the Quality Parenting Initiative see <http://qpi4kids.org> or “No Place Like Home: A Review of the Quality Parenting Initiative” (2011), available at <http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/ReviewOfQPI2011.pdf>.
 - 2 For more information about the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership see ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp.



Contents

Organization of the Guide	2
1. Birth and Foster Parent Partnerships and Benefits to Children	3
2. Key Elements of Culture Change	5
3. What the Experts Say: Recommendations from Birth and Foster Parents Engaged in Partnership	11
4. Promising Practices and Policies	14
5. Implementation Tips	21
Final Words of Encouragement	25



Organization of the Guide

This guide is divided into five substantive sections followed by an afterword. While readers may begin with the section(s) that most directly address their interests, the guide is most useful when considered as a whole.

Section 1 provides the rationale for why supporting birth and foster parent partnerships is critical to meet the goals of the child welfare system.

Section 2 addresses the key elements of agency culture that must be in place for successful implementation and how to support that culture through stakeholder buy-in, clear messaging, support for stakeholders and active engagement of staff, birth and foster families and youth.

Section 3 provides details on seven specific practice recommendations that birth and foster parents have made to agencies implementing co-parenting relationships.

Section 4 describes a series of field-informed promising practices and policies applicable to each chronological step in the life cycle of a child's placement; beginning with foster parent recruitment and ending with the period after reunification or other permanency.

Section 5 offers tips for sustaining implementation, tailoring practices to fit the unique needs of individual families, and making ongoing improvements.

Finally, we close this guide with a few **words of encouragement** for those considering the difficult work of change necessary to provide excellent parenting for our children in the foster care system. Despite the challenges inherent to implementing new system-wide practices and policies, birth and foster parents, staff, and youth alike tell us clearly that this work is well worth the rewards it offers.

1. Birth and Foster Parent Partnerships and Benefits to Children

When we assess the effectiveness of our child welfare policies and practices, our primary criteria must be if they serve to meet the needs of children in care and if they meet the full scope of children's needs. Despite being well-intentioned, practices that create barriers between birth parents and foster parents in the interest of safety often unintentionally undermine the goal of supporting children's welfare by limiting parents' ability to provide positive interventions that address all levels of a child's needs. This section addresses the ways in which removing these barriers and supporting birth and foster parent partnerships directly supports the overall wellbeing of children and their families and contributes to positive outcomes.

Research in child development and trauma has shown that children require constant, consistent, and effective parenting in order to thrive in adulthood and realize their potential. Birth and foster parents working collaboratively to parent a child can provide a level of consistency and quality parenting that birth and foster families in tension with or isolation from one another simply cannot. Through our work with a wide variety of local jurisdictions, we have witnessed the ways in which birth parents and foster parents working together to co-parent a child can offer the type of high-quality parenting that children need in order to thrive. As co-parenting partners, birth and foster parents can avoid painful and damaging conflicts, freely share vital information about the child's needs, facilitate smooth and mutually-beneficial visits, collaboratively plan for transitions, preserve the child's relationships with both families, avoid unnecessary placement

disruptions, limit the child's experience of grief and loss due to being placed in foster care, and support positive long-term outcomes for both parents and children.

Conflict Reduction

Research studies on childhood exposure to parental conflict show that exposure to significant levels of conflict is harmful to a child, particularly when the child is the subject of the conflict.³ In contrast, harmonious, collaborative relationships between parents and parental figures support children's positive outcomes in adulthood. Birth and foster parents working together in a co-parenting partnership can minimize harmful conflicts while modelling a positive, cooperative relationship. Furthermore, parent partnerships spare children the dilemma of feeling they must "choose sides" between families, reducing the likelihood that they will feel a sense of divided loyalty that threatens to damage their relationships with both families.

Significant lack of conflict between families helps a child to preserve their relationship with their birth family while developing a new supportive relationship with their foster family, laying a foundation of stability that will be important throughout the course of the placement.



"For me, it's super important for there to be some sort of structure when it comes to how my parents are going to interact with each other. I want to make sure that 1) they all get along, because at the end of the day, they are all in each other's lives because of me, and 2) [...] they can work together to parent not only me, but also my other siblings."

Kimberly, California Youth Connection (CYC) youth member



³ Reynolds, J., Houlston, C., Coleman, L., & Harold, G. (2014). Parental conflict: Outcomes and interventions for children and families. Bristol, UK; Chicago, IL, USA: Bristol University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1t6p6t4

Information-Sharing

While foster parents generally are in a position that equips them to care for a foster child, upon initial placement they often lack information about the child that would allow them to provide the best care possible. Birth parents possess a wealth of intimate, detailed knowledge of their child, which can be shared with foster parents in the context of a co-parenting partnership to improve the child's experience of care.

The knowledge birth parents have about their child can address needs at a variety of levels. At the most basic physiological level, upon their child's initial placement birth parents can provide foster parents with information that might be lifesaving, including information about the child's allergies, health care needs, medical treatment, and care providers. Birth parents also possess critical knowledge, which may be difficult or impossible to learn from the child themselves, of how to support the child's emotional and developmental needs. For example, a birth parent can make a foster parent aware of the child's familiar routines and traditions, allowing the foster parent to maintain some consistency for the child. Birth parents can provide important

context for behavior that foster parents may otherwise misinterpret, sharing details about the child's likes, dislikes, interests, fears, and habits. Foster parents can benefit from knowledge birth parents have gained through experience about how to engage the child in play, offer comfort, and give constructive discipline. When inevitable challenges in the placement arise, foster parents who are equipped with the depth and breadth of information birth parents can offer will be able to respond in informed ways and avoid unnecessary missteps.



"[The foster parent] stood up for me and said, 'Your kids are safe. They are fine. They are going to be OK. You need to worry about getting yourself better and making sure you have a job to take care of your kids, making sure you have a home for these kids to live in.' And it let me refocus my every thought, not on getting them home to me, but [on setting] a strong foundation for these kids."

Janel, birth parent, California



Improved Permanence Outcomes

One of the key predictors of timely, effective permanence for children in foster care is if the foster and birth parents connected immediately after the child's placement. For a child newly placed with a foster family, immediate communication with a birth parent can help reduce feelings of grief and trauma by reassuring the child that they have not lost their family and will remain connected. Immediate communication between the birth and foster parents reassures birth parents that their children are safe, provides them with context for what kind of person the foster parent is, and sets a precedent and expectation that they will have regular contact with their child. This reassuring contact lays the foundation for a successful co-parenting partnership, supports the stability of the placement, and helps birth parents focus on their case instead of the unknowns of their child's new circumstances.

Improved Visitation

When birth and foster parents are working collaboratively, the process of visitation is smoother, richer, and more organic than staff-led visitation. Foster parents can coordinate with birth parents so that visits occur in locations that are familiar and enjoyable for the child and that are convenient for the birth parent. Foster parents can use the occasion to coach birth parents and help them gain new parenting skills, based on interactions with the child or topics in which the birth parent has expressed interest. The process of coordinating and communicating about visits also allows parents to smooth the child's transition into and out of visits, increasing feelings of normalcy and positivity associated with visitation for both the child and the birth parent.



Successful Reunification

Reunification is a more viable goal when birth and foster parents work in partnership, because of the support the partnership can offer both during and after a placement.

During the placement, a birth parent who has developed a supportive relationship with their child's foster parents and is confident that their child is in good hands can better focus on successfully completing their case plan. Foster parents who have an active relationship with birth parents can serve as mentors and coaches, supporting birth parents in gaining the skills, experience, and knowledge they need to complete their case plan and provide good care for their child in the long term.

Foster parents who partner with birth parents during the placement are significantly more likely remain an active presence in the child's life after reunification. In remaining connected after the placement ends, the foster parent can both smooth the child's transition from foster placement back to the birth

parent and offer ongoing support to the birth parent, which may include childcare, coaching, and other emotional support. The foster parent's ongoing presence in the child's life after reunification also averts the grief and trauma of a permanent separation by maintaining the continuity of the caregiving relationship, further supporting the success of the reunification.



"We're transitioning right now, and so there are a lot of visits. And it makes me feel so good because the baby is so happy to go see mom, to be at mom's, and then she's happy to come back to me. And she's just such a happy child; so much of her life, she's so happy. And I think that you can't ask for more than that."

Barbara, foster parent, Nevada



Improved Transitions

Even when a transition is considered to be positive, as with a reunification or placement with a permanent family, the change can still be traumatic for a child, for whom the experience presents yet another disruption to their daily life, routines, and relationships. A traumatic transition can threaten the success of a reunification or other permanent placement and can potentially damage the child's subsequent relationships. Birth and foster parents can work collaboratively with case workers to plan for transitions when they must occur, taking into account the child's developmental needs and finding creative solutions to ease the shock of transition. For example, birth and foster co-parents may coordinate to slowly increase visit times, spend time together in the new home prior to the new placement, and later revisit the previous home after placement. Birth and foster parents working as partners are best equipped to recognize and respond effectively to the developmental and individual needs of a child in adjusting to placement transitions.

2. Key Elements of Culture Change

Supporting birth and foster parent partnerships is one component of a broader shift in child welfare practice to prioritize relationships. While the work of creating a relationship-based child welfare system has been pioneered and tested by Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) jurisdictions, any jurisdiction can learn from QPI's experiences and implement relationship-focused principles.

However, our work in local jurisdictions has shown that the task of creating relationship-oriented change goes beyond simply designing and instituting new policies and procedures. Agencies that have successfully implemented policies and practices

that support birth and foster parent partnerships first cultivated stakeholder buy-in and developed clear, consistent messaging and support structures for the parents and staff who would implement the desired changes. In fact, the policies and practices these agencies have implemented were the product of conversations with staff, birth and foster parents, and youth who used their lived experience to recommend specific changes, rather than being imposed from above. Any agency committed to investing in birth and foster parent partnerships must also invest in the full culture shift necessary to achieve goals for change.



"I think those visits really are key, and I think that it's the relationship that you form with the parents and the foster parents, and also the social worker. I think the social worker has to be a key part [...] following up about how visits are going. What I found as a foster parent is that we have to advocate more for the visits when it is appropriate."

Phillip, foster parent, Nevada



Below we have outlined the elements of culture change that jurisdictions who have engaged in the process of implementing support for birth and foster co-parenting partnerships highlight as critical to long-term success.

Agency Support for Partnerships

In order to promote successful birth and foster co-parenting relationships, agencies must actively invest in supporting their development. For agencies considering such a change, it is not always clear at the outset what the scope of such an investment will entail. The investment needed to create effective, lasting change will typically go beyond simply affirming of support and providing change directives. Demonstrating active agency support for co-parenting relationships may involve a significant time and effort spent examining and revising long-established practices or received knowledge that implicitly opposes co-parenting partnerships and developing structures to support growth and sustainability once obstacles have been removed. Typically, these processes of examination and restructuring must also be done in partnership with those whom practice changes most directly affect. While agencies must invest in this process up front, the ultimate benefits and time savings produced over the course of each child welfare case will be considerable and can in fact make caseworkers' jobs easier, not harder.⁴

A child welfare agency's culture and practices can either actively support co-parenting or pose obstacles to it. Obstacles may result from lack of clear guidance, myths, misinformation, or confusion, or they may be the result of longstanding practices or concrete policy barriers, all of which can be equally powerful in

discouraging good practice. Barriers may even be strikingly physical, as with the historical practice of requiring foster parents and birth parents to use separate entrances at visitation centers. This practice explicitly discouraged contact, using the structure of the building itself to communicate that birth parents are separate from and in opposition to foster parents. Regardless of whether such messaging was always intentional, practices like these both reveal and reinforce assumptions about birth and foster parents that create obstacles in the way of partnership. Most agencies have since abandoned such clearly problematic practices, but all agencies should spend time examining their received knowledge, cultural trends, policies, and practices that may pose similar explicit and implicit barriers to co-parenting.



“[Our foster children] Ethan and Braden have been with us long enough that they are a part of the family, and so we will miss them when they go home. We will want to continue that relationship with them and watch them grow up. We do want to keep up that relationship, and in order to do that after they go home, you have to foster that relationship right now.”

Anya, foster parent, Nevada



In addition to removing identified barriers, agencies must also invest time in developing positive resources and structures that actively support the development of co-parenting partnerships and sustain them. Examples of promising practices that support parent partnerships are discussed in more detail in Section 4 on

page 14.⁵ A lack of barriers, the presence of supportive structures, and clear direction from agency leadership will allow foster parents, who once had to work around agencies to partner with birth parents, to openly co-parent and give case workers the time, permission, and necessary tools to support co-parenting relationships. Case workers will find that with agency support for co-parenting, families will take it upon themselves to share information, facilitate successful visits, plan smooth transitions, and offer long-lasting support for reunification, improving outcomes for the child and offering greater job satisfaction and time savings for workers.

Leadership Support

Visible, tangible leadership support for birth and foster parent partnerships is critical if these relationships are to thrive and become normalized as a routine component of agency practice. Leaders should not only assert their support for co-parenting partnerships but demonstrate full commitment by making them a major agency priority and displaying a willingness to proceed despite potential challenges. Doing so will involve supporting the changes necessary to accomplish this goal, both verbally and materially, including actively engaging with birth and foster parents for their input on policy and practice improvements. The visible support of leadership will communicate to staff at all levels that the agency believes that co-parenting relationships and agency-parent partnerships will lead to the best possible improvements to policy and practice and the best outcomes for children in care.

On page 10, local and state leaders who have successfully implemented support for birth and foster parent partnerships reflect on how they committed to making relationship-based changes at their agencies.

⁴ For example, see: Children's Hospital of Wisconsin QPI "Partnership Parenting" results: www.qpi4kids.org/documents/2017_newSitesConference/Partnership%20Parenting%20WI.pdf

⁵ See also the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership Policy and Practice Priorities Brief, available at: ctf alliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp

Approval at All System Levels

Buy-in from stakeholders at all levels of the system is crucial for successful, lasting culture change. Workers at every agency level play an important role in supporting and implementing new policies. While clear, decisive leadership commitment to supporting co-parenting partnerships is important in paving the way for others to buy in, a commitment from frontline workers who interact directly with families is particularly important.



“For such a long time, and it trickled down from the agency to service providers like us, inadvertently everything we do is unsupportive of these relationships. We separate foster parents and birth parents. We never give them a chance to have any kind of contact. We feel like we have to protect the birth parents from the foster parents and the foster parents from the birth parents. And looking back, it makes absolutely no sense.”

Evangeline, program director, Louisiana



Frontline workers will be the ones implementing changes at the ground level, and without their buy-in, consistent implementation and normalization of new practices will be next to impossible. Beyond being instrumental for implementation, case workers are familiar with the children and families on their caseload and have keen insight into many of the barriers that children and families face. They may often feel, sometimes rightly, that they do not have the power to remove barriers or help families overcome them. When frontline staff are given a chance to provide input,

their ideas and insights can be the catalyst for developing effective, feasible ways of doing things. Moreover, involving staff in the development of new policies and practices is the single best way to motivate buy-in, giving staff a sense of ownership over the practices for which they will be held accountable.

Finally, staff are more likely to buy in when they understand why practice changes are necessary and how the changes will tangibly improve their work with children and families. Workers who have come to support birth and foster parent partnerships in QPI jurisdictions do so because they have seen how these partnerships improve outcomes for children and families, align with good social work practice, and avert the distress and additional work that failed placements cause. Emphasizing the ways that birth and foster parent partnerships benefit children, families, and staff is key to motivating stakeholders at every level of the agency to engage with the change process.

Implementation at All System Levels

The changes required to support birth and foster parent partnerships will have ramifications for every aspect of agency practice. Agencies will therefore need to direct a coordinated process of review and implementation to ensure that all teams and segments of the agency involved in a child’s placement in care are working in concert to promote co-parenting relationships.

Practice at each stage of a placement must be proactively supportive of birth and foster parent partnerships in order for these relationships to succeed and proliferate. During recruitment, messaging to prospective foster parents must clearly indicate the expectation that foster parents will partner directly with birth parents. Pre-service training must both normalize the expectation that foster parents will

work with birth parents and provide concrete methods and tools for doing so. Placement decision-makers must take into consideration whether a foster parent is willing to work with a birth parent and be prepared not to place with the parent on that basis if needed. Workers bringing a child to a new home must use the opportunity to initiate a connection between the foster and birth parents whenever possible. Ongoing caseworkers should provide support for birth and foster parents in navigating their partnership and troubleshooting issues that arise. Permanency workers must help ensure that children can maintain supportive relationships with previous caregivers when the children move to a permanent home.

Agencies should not underestimate or underplay the scope of change that will be required to provide systemic support for co-parenting relationships. Leaders and staff can engage frontline workers, birth parents, and foster parents to determine where barriers currently exist and how they might be removed. Acknowledging the breadth of impact and engaging the most-affected stakeholders in the change process will help ensure that change is implemented comprehensively and effectively.



“We think about transformation, and we are thinking about envisioning a new future. And who better to help us think through and imagine what that system would look like and should look like and can look like than young people and birth parents and foster parents and those who are in the trenches and on the frontlines every day.”

**Brandy, lived experience advocate,
Virginia**



Alignment with Current System Reform Efforts

When agency administrators routinely introduce new reform efforts, staff and other system stakeholders can eventually begin to experience initiative fatigue. That is, in a system where time, resources, and emotional energy are limited but the number of initiatives continues to increase, each new initiative will seem more burdensome and unwelcome and receive less devoted attention than those that preceded it. Therefore, it is incumbent upon leaders to demonstrate that supporting birth and foster parent partnerships is not a wholly new initiative but an effort to deepen support for system change processes already underway.

Co-parenting relationships in foster care are consistent with the goals of most current child welfare policy reform efforts throughout the country, as they are foundational to meeting basic goals of safety, permanency, and wellbeing for children. Leaders communicating about proposed changes with staff, families, and other stakeholders should plan to illustrate how supporting these birth and foster

parent partnerships helps meet goals that system stakeholders are already pursuing. Doing so can help shape perception that these changes are necessary improvements to existing practice rather than additions or sudden reversals. Moreover, connecting the dots integrating proposed changes into overall reform efforts helps align the change initiative with stakeholders' own values, motivating the buy-in necessary for engagement and successful implementation.



“As foster parents, ideally, we interact with the birth parents more than anybody else on the case—a couple times a week, at drop-offs. We are co-parenting with these birth parents. [...] But I’ve found a lot of times that when I advocate for things that I’m seeing [and I say], ‘This parent is really struggling with this. If this is going to be successful in the long term, these are the skills that the parent needs to parent this child,’ [I’m] not having that listened to.”

Dominique, foster parent, California



Clear Directives and Support for All Agency Staff

Agency leadership must do the heavy lifting of re-examining agency culture to remove barriers, gaining input on policy and procedure, developing supportive structures for staff and families, and communicating changes across the agency. However, frontline staff bear a burden of risk as the ones implementing changes in day-to-day practice. For staff to risk implementing new practices, they need to have several assurances in place—that they have time and permission to test out these new practices, management support if there are challenges, and written directives to reference to support and guide their practice. Staff should also be given the opportunity to express any fears they have about new approaches and identify the commitments they need to have from leadership in order to feel supported.

To successfully make practice changes and feel supported in doing so, workers should also be given clear accountability mechanisms for themselves and leadership. Staff across the agency should be engaged in identifying the specific changes that



they will make to their practice and for which they will be held responsible, with supervisory and management support throughout the process. Staff performance evaluations can then include clear measures of how well workers are implementing these identified changes to support birth and foster parent partnerships. If directives are not resulting in practices that bring the desired outcomes, then leadership should be held accountable for changing directives to reflect practices that will get better results, based on staff and parent input.

Clear Expectations for Foster Parents

As agencies across the country are increasingly working to engage foster parents as equal partners who provide a key intervention, supporting foster parents' work with birth families naturally becomes a key component of the agency-foster parent partnership. Creating expectations and support for co-parenting is an essential element in making the foster parent a genuine partner in fulfilling the child welfare system's goals.

All messages about fostering should clearly express that partnering with birth parents is a core part of fostering in almost all cases. As mentioned above, messages to prospective foster parents about working with birth parents should begin during early recruitment efforts, continue through orientation and pre-service training, and be part of conversations with licensing and placement workers. With these clear expectations established, new foster parents will see their role as inherently involving work with birth parents. Experienced foster parents who have embraced co-parenting with birth parents and personally experienced working in partnership can

help mentor and support new foster parents in developing their skill in this aspect of their role.

The training practices and tools offered to foster parents are also critical to establishing clear expectations regarding co-parenting relationships. For current foster parents, ongoing trainings can be modified to include panels of birth and foster parent pairs who can offer concrete guidance and answer questions about co-parenting. Agencies can develop written partnership agreement templates that can be used to clarify the expectations for and respective roles of foster parents, birth parents, and agency staff working in partnership. Case workers can use such agreement documents to guide conversations with both new and experienced foster parents about the agency's commitment to supporting foster parents as they make changes to incorporate work with birth parents into their role. Close alignment between the agency's expectations of foster parents and foster parents' understanding of their role will ensure the agency and foster parents are working toward shared goals and will reassure foster parents that agency support for co-parenting is readily available.



"I have done a lot of work in the field as an alumna and also from the perspective of a birth parent, and I believe very strongly that the voices of those who have lived experience, who have experienced systems, are the voices that should be leading the charge in child welfare reform."

**Brandy, lived experience advocate,
Virginia**



Training for Staff

Staff training is a key site for equipping workers to implement new policies and practices in support of birth and foster parent partnerships. In the process of designing new trainings or updating existing trainings, agencies should intentionally structure them in such a way that the training process will necessarily improve practice, motivate buy-in, and sustain implementation.

Trainings should be designed to be interactive in ways that engage both staff and parents in exchanging ideas and communicating in concrete terms about policies and practices to support co-parenting. Beyond basing policy and practice on parent recommendations, agencies can establish birth and foster parents as partners with the agency and as sources of expertise by inviting them to serve as panelists in staff trainings, where they can speak directly to and with staff about their co-parenting experiences. The agency also can reinforce its commitment to incorporating the perspectives of frontline workers by structuring trainings to continually solicit workers' ideas through discussions about implementation. Doing so can tangibly improve agency practice in the process of affirming workers' ownership of it. Agencies can also leverage staff buy-in by establishing mentorship as a component of training, partnering more experienced and supportive workers with those less experienced or less convinced of the value of supporting co-parenting relationships. Structuring training as a site for ongoing practice improvements and centering direct, mutually supportive relationships between staff and parents as a core of the training process will contribute to both the quality and sustainability of implementation.

Local and State Leaders Reflect on Successful Implementation

“When I first heard the term ‘Quality Parenting,’ I was immediately intrigued. I wanted to be a quality parent, and I wanted my kids to have the best parent possible. Didn’t everybody? So began the Louisiana journey into QPI.

“Our early focus groups surprised us as we heard story after story of foster parents who wanted to work with birth parents, and of birth parents who needed to understand the system, who ‘had their kids,’ and how to manage relationships. The stories from the youth were clear—choosing between family and foster family was a dynamic that hurt in every way, so why not do it this way? Understanding that the people involved in the most intimate ways with the system wanted it to change gave us the courage to tackle system-change with our staff. Let’s face it, changing a system is hard work. We have been doing foster care a certain way for a long time, and moving to something new wouldn’t be easy. Until it was. Staff member after staff member began to get excited and to understand this new dynamic was truly making a difference in the lives of our foster and birth families.

“The big winners are our kids, their parents, and their ‘bonus’ parents, the foster families who have loved and supported them and their parents as we have made families whole again with support teams around them who continue to be there for our kids.”

Marketa Garner Walters, Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services



“From an agency administrator perspective, I asked myself, ‘Why did we take these principles to heart (so to speak)?’ What I came up with is that we didn’t start with the empowerment of birth families—we didn’t know that we should. We started with placement stability, emotional needs of children in care, reunification barriers and long-term success, case management consistency, court understanding—all of which we felt were not what they could be and in many cases, doing more harm than good. The concept and practice of including birth families in co-parenting practices and policy decisions grew out of trying to improve the specifics of kids being away from their families and cared for by us and others, but more importantly us being taught to realize the long-term damage to children and their parents of

not forming relationships in caregivers. We had to be shown and then coached into how to incorporate that thinking into every single action we took. Of course this is something we still work on daily and struggle with but the ideas and their acceptance and understanding are in place. QPI was this change for us but it started with simply wrapping our heads around the idea of the importance of an organizational chart being sent out to everyone—transparency, and questioning our rules and practices. I think that other child welfare system folk need some tangibles to relate to in order to embark on changing how they think of things. If we had been presented with ‘You need to include birth parents in co-parenting’ we wouldn’t have known what that means, where to start, or even why. Lead with changing things in the system that folks see as unacceptable.”

Alice Ledesma, Retired Division Director of Children’s Services, Washoe County, Nevada



“The types of system reforms we have committed ourselves to actually depend upon a fundamental shift in the relationship between the agency, the foster caregiver and the birth parent. The creation of effective three-way partnerships is foundational to a practice in which family and parenting is at the core of care. If these partnerships are not realized, the reform goals, regardless of the resources provided, will not be achieved.

“At the same time, acknowledging the centrality of these partnerships does not remove all of the obstacles to creating them. As both a county and then a state director implementing QPI, I have seen first-hand that for every agency social worker and foster caregiver who intuitively grasps the promise of this way of providing stability for children we are looking after, there are others who are reluctant because of the ‘what-ifs’ that bubble up. As leaders we have to be sure that those with concerns and misgivings have safe places to voice them, and that they receive firm assurances of support for the difficult times that may occur.”

Will Lightbourne, Retired Director of the California Department of Social Services



3. What the Experts Say: Recommendations from Birth and Foster Parents Engaged in Partnership

In 2018, the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP), funded by Casey Family Programs, hosted four convenings in jurisdictions across the country. These jurisdictions were Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) leaders in implementing the changes to culture, practice, and policy necessary to support co-parenting partnerships. Birth and foster parent participants in each jurisdiction gathered to discuss these partnerships—the benefits of co-parenting, the challenges of co-parenting, and which policies and practices had been the most impactful in supporting their partnerships.

The perspectives shared by the birth and foster parents were remarkably consistent across each of the four convenings. Overall, parents were unified in their support for co-parenting, their recommendations to agency leaders and staff for effective implementation strategies, and their concerns about remaining issues to be addressed. From their input based on their own lived experience, seven core recommendations for child welfare practice emerged. In this section, we summarize these recommendations and provide example resources and practical tools in support of implementation. The recommendations of birth and foster parents, as those most directly affected by an agency's practices relating to co-parenting relationships, should be the foundation of any implementation initiative.

Good Customer Service

A commitment to foregrounding empathy, respect, and caring while working with and for others is at the heart of customer service. Parents affirmed that agency staff can develop more effective partnerships when they provide good customer service—taking a strengths-based, non-adversarial approach and treating birth parents, foster parents, and children alike respectfully and consistently. In particular, birth and foster parents highlighted the importance of general practice changes in their jurisdictions that aim to treat foster parents and birth parents as valued partners in child welfare practice.⁶

Clear Expectations

In order to build strong parent partnerships and meet children's needs by centering them in child welfare practice, all system participants—including birth parents, foster parents, and child welfare workers—must clearly understand their respective roles and role expectations. Convening participants identified tools such as the QPI Partnership Plan (described in more detail in Section 4) which can provide a framework for discussing partner roles and expectations in order to support constructive working relationships. Additionally, convening participants referenced other types of documents that QPI sites have created to establish shared expectations for the system, caregivers, and agency staff.⁷

• • • • •

"I didn't know until I was a foster parent, that I was a child from a hard place. When I realized that while being a foster parent, it certainly enlightened me that biological parents that lose their children are children from hard places, too...but every foster parent doesn't have that philosophy. How do you put it in them? I don't know. Can we work on that? Absolutely!"

Tabitha, foster parent, Louisiana

"I think that from the beginning the engagement with fathers could improve. I didn't feel like I was part of anything until I went to a child and family team (CFT) meeting. I felt left out because with our case, we did have an opportunity of prevention. And only the mother of my children received those resources that she needed, and I was completely left out. So, I think the engagement right from the beginning—because there are men, fathers that are trying to reunify—is really important for us, too. It can really make a difference in the case."

Manny, birth parent, California

• • • • •

6 See Florida's Customer Service training in child welfare training video: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/customerservice/start.html>

7 See, for example, Louisiana's Quality Parenting Commitment document: <http://www.dcf.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/QPI%20Commitment%20Expectations%20and%20Practice%20Matrix.pdf>



“Honestly, when QPI was first introduced to us, I was like, oh my gosh, more work for us, like we don’t have enough to get done. But now it’s less work because we aren’t supervising as many family visits, because the foster parents are taking over and doing the visits. So it takes a little time off of our busy schedule, so we don’t have to worry about scheduling a visit.”

Kayla, case manager, Louisiana

“Transitions also mark that it’s not necessarily a beginning and end of something. [...] Roles are not always clearly defined, where a role starts, and a foster parent is transitioning a child back home. That relationship may continue, and not bringing openness and respect to that relationship can be damaging for everyone involved.”

**Birth parent participant, BFPP
Convening**

“I wasn’t able to see [my daughter] for three weeks, and the only contact I was able to have was to call the hospital. I just think it would have been nice to have the contact with the emergency foster mom, to let me know how [my daughter] was doing, because CPS is really overloaded, and my social worker was really overloaded.”

Ashley, birth parent, California



Agency Support

Birth and foster parent participants confirmed the central message of this guide—that agencies must actively provide support to birth parents and foster parents if they are to build and maintain strong parent partnerships. Support for parent partnerships should be integrated into agency policies and procedures and should be considered standard practice except in cases where safety concerns prevent it. Parents identified specific agency practices that were critical for supporting co-parenting, including comfort calls, icebreakers, joint visits, revised foster parent training, and strengths-based early information-sharing. Parents also noted the central role that caseworkers play in facilitating co-parenting partnerships, in particular by ensuring that connections between birth and foster parents are made very early on in the case, averting parents’ potential misconceptions about each other and enabling better ongoing collaboration from the beginning.⁸

Good Communication among Agency Workers and Parents

Parents recommended that agency workers support the timely, thorough, and mutual sharing of information to support the wellbeing of the child. Agencies and caseworkers can do so by both facilitating information-sharing directly and by proactively addressing misconceptions about barriers to communication.

Convening participants recommended that case workers provide families with as much information as possible at the beginning of a new placement, create early and ongoing opportunities for families to exchange information, and encourage families to continue sharing information in an ongoing manner during and after the placement. Parents emphasized that workers bear a responsibility for ensuring that both birth and foster parents have the information necessary to fulfill their roles and co-parent successfully. When birth and foster



⁸ See Section 2 for detailed recommendations on developing support structures at all levels of the agency, and Section 4 for specific guidance on agency practice recommendations.

parents ask for clarification, workers should respond in a timely and clear way with relevant information. Parents who attended the convenings also noted how important QPI-information-sharing documents and trainings were to dispel myths about what information-sharing practices were acceptable and ensure that parents feel supported in identifying and making the most of information-sharing opportunities.⁹

Visitation Support

As discussed in Section 1, one of the benefits of the co-parenting relationship is that it allows for more natural, organic visitation. One of the key ways agencies can support visitation is by entrusting the majority of the process to the parents themselves. When safe to do so, agency workers can entrust visit logistics to the parents, allowing them to set a visitation schedule and visit locations that work well for both families, while continuing to partner with parents to ensure that visits are working well for the child and support the case plan. Additionally, case workers can support successful visitation by equipping foster parents to be present during visitation and support birth parents' learning and skill development. During two of the convenings, parents discussed the positive impact of the Fostering Relationships in Visitation (FRV) program, developed through QPI, which trains foster parents to coach and support birth parents during visits.¹⁰

Transition Support

As discussed in Section 1, birth and foster parent partnerships help smooth placement transitions to reduce trauma to the child and strengthen their long-term relationships with supportive adults. Convening participants highlighted agency practices for creating child-centered transition processes that are focused on maintaining relationships and continuity during placement transitions. Parents recommended agencies closely coordinate with co-parents, who can use their caregiving expertise to plan for visitation, normalcy activities, and continuity of routines and traditions that support the child's wellbeing during transitions.¹¹

Father Engagement

Convening participants urged workers to view birth fathers, foster dads, and other father figures as valuable parental figures and as important adults in the lives of children in care. Whenever it is safe to do so, agency staff should support fathers' and father figures' participation in birth and foster parent partnerships and in all other aspects of the case plan, including conducting outreach to father figures who may not otherwise be closely involved in the case or the child's life in general. Despite the fact that fathers are typically the non-custodial parents in child welfare cases, the need for engagement in co-parenting and in the case plan extends to any non-custodial parent when it is in the best interest of the children to engage them.¹²



“One of the things that the state didn't do that they have done in the past couple of years since the coming of QPI that's made a huge difference is setting the expectation that this is what we do, and then giving permission.”

Evangeline, program director, Louisiana

“Quality parenting means to me that all parents—foster, birth, and adoptive—are important in the life of a child, and we can, and all should, work together. We in the agency are letting these parents parent together so these people can all be part of the child's life. That's the magic.”

Rose Eshe, social worker, California

“You know I'm one of the few fathers here. [...] There are no fathers here; there are only just the mothers, you know. And I think that's sad. But maybe that will be more of a goal, to get the fathers involved in what is going on, too, and not just try to deal with the birth mothers. If the father's not there, at least try to get him involved in the situation.”

Timothy, birth parent, Louisiana



⁹ See, for example: <http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/infosharing/Information.Sharing.6.2015.pdf>

¹⁰ For more information on FRV, see Section 4 as well as and information flyer at http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/bestPractices/FRV_InformationalFlyer.pdf and video of a discussion of FRV practice at <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/qpi/nevada/fosteringrelationshipsintro/start.html>.

¹¹ For more detailed information about agency practices that support successful transitions, see the Planful Transition Practice Guide from Louisiana DCFS at <http://www.dcs.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/Planful%20Transitions%20Practice%20Guide.pdf>.

¹² For one example of a father-friendly organizational self-assessment used in Fresno County, CA's QPI process, see <https://calswec.berkeley.edu/father-engagement-and-father-involvement-toolkit/assessment-tools>

4. Promising Practices and Policies

In this section, we will discuss promising practices and policies which are being implemented in QPI jurisdictions across the country and have been shown to support early connections, help maintain strong birth and foster parent relationships, and support the wellbeing of children throughout the life of a case. These practices and policies are grouped according to the stage of the placement to which they're relevant, beginning with pre-placement and after reunification or other permanency outcome.

While recommendations for the different stages of a placement have been discussed in more general, explanatory terms in previous sections above, here we focus on specific, concrete policies and practices currently in use in QPI jurisdictions. To support agencies that wish to implement similar changes, many of the recommendations below are followed by one or more hyperlinked example resources

that can be used both to illustrate the recommendation in action and serve as a template for developing similar policies and practices.

Before Placement

Agencies must take proactive steps to develop a culture where co-parenting is normalized and promoted throughout the full life cycle of a placement. In order to fully communicate that birth and foster parent partnerships are the expectation, not the exception, leaders and staff must identify opportunities in the period before placement to develop support for co-parenting. Specifically, agencies can design policies and practices for recruitment, messaging to birth and foster parents, engaging fathers, and placement decision-making that clearly prioritize and support birth and foster parent partnerships.

Including birth parents in recruitment and training. Agencies can clearly communicate to potential foster parents that partnership with birth parents is a practice norm by involving birth parents in recruitment and training. Birth parents who are included in recruitment teams and during foster parent trainings can speak directly to foster parents about their co-parenting experiences, dispel myths and fears about birth parents, and generate enthusiasm for the prospect of the co-parenting partnership.

- For more information about recruiting foster parents for co-parenting relationships, see the video of the “Relationship-Based Recruitment” workshop at the 2019 QPI National Conference. In this video, we hear about Minnesota’s recruitment of foster parents to partner with birth parents; Big Bend CBC’s (Florida) lived-experience recruitment team; and

Practice Spotlight:

How a Successful Birth and Foster Parent Partnership Contributed to Systems Change in Sonoma County California

Several QPI sites have had the benefit of sending parent leaders to participate in national BFPP trainings and have been able to accelerate and strengthen their partnership work within the QPI process as a result. For example, one California county has worked over the past decade to implement icebreakers among birth parents and foster parents at initial placement, to appoint a specific staff person to facilitate these conversations and relationships, to develop a new information-sharing policy for birth parents and foster parents, to provide foster parents more support and transparency during the complaint/allegations process, and to implement joint training for parents and social workers. Two parents from this site returned from the national BFPP convening with the idea to pilot a new program. The pilot program brings a birth parent mentor and a foster parent mentor

together to support co-parenting between specific birth and foster parent teams. The mentor team helps the parenting team work together for the benefit of the children.¹³

The county agency has subsequently incorporated this pilot proposal into agency practice, and has provided mandatory training for all agency staff (which has included families and youth) on this new partnership model and the importance of co-parenting, highlighting successes and lessons learned in specific cases.¹⁴ The QPI steering committee in that county has now committed to working to address some of the issues that have been identified as a result of the pilot program, including issues regarding visitation, icebreakers on subsequent placements, comfort calls, and transitions.

¹³ For more information about Sonoma County’s QPI work to support co-parenting, see: <https://www.casey.org/birth-foster-parent-partnership/>

¹⁴ See one part of mandatory training at: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/california/sonomawelcome/start.html>

Heartland CBC's (Florida) inclusion of birth parents in recruitment and training: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/2019nationalconf/relbasedrecruit/start.html>



"I feel like on my end, I would have liked a little more information regarding [the foster mother] and her husband before I actually met them, just because I knew nothing about them. I knew the icebreaker was going to happen. I don't even remember knowing her name before that happened. I pretty much just knew that my child was going into her care, and I had to meet them."

Alyssa, birth parent, California



Consistent messaging in recruitment and training. Agencies that support birth and foster parent partnerships should ensure early and consistent messaging to prospective and licensed foster parents about co-parenting expectations during all recruitment events, orientations, and trainings. Multiple agencies have developed trainings to provide foster parents with practical tips and techniques to coach and mentor birth parents and to navigate their co-parenting relationships.

- Florida's "The Passport to Quality Parenting" training offers a clear example of how foster parent trainings can incorporate pervasive messaging about co-parenting expectations and equip foster parents with tools for partnering with birth parents: <http://www.qpiflorida.org/passport.html>
- A similar example of foster parenting training is Ventura County's "21st Century Foster Parent: Fostering VC Kids Resource Family Training" program: <http://www.qpicalifornia.org/21stCentury.html>

- A fact sheet provided through the Child Welfare Information Gateway provides clear messaging and explanation of how birth and foster parent partnerships promote reunification: www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/factsheets_families_partnerships.pdf

Placement decision-making. Children for whom the plan is reunification should only be placed with families that are committed to working with birth parents, even if the birth parent is not currently ready for a partnership. Placement decision-makers should be prepared not to place a child with an available family on the basis of unwillingness to work with birth parents, and they should be supported by the agency in making such placement decisions. In order to clearly set expectations, prospective foster parents should be made aware that placement decisions take their openness to co-parenting partnerships into account.

Father engagement. Agency workers should seek out birth fathers and other father figures to engage them in the child welfare process and the co-parenting partnership. As discussed in Section 3, involving birth fathers and father figures can increase the number of supportive adults in the child's life and improve the child's overall experience of care. Agencies can support fathers' involvement in birth and foster parent partnerships by including them in the case plan and facilitating communication with the foster parents about the child.

- CalSWEC (the California Social Work Education Center) at UC Berkeley has assembled a comprehensive "Father Engagement and Father Involvement Toolkit" which offers a wealth of guidance for social workers and agencies to support father involvement. See in particular the "Engagement & Communication Tools" section, which provides additional links to example tools used in California to promote

father engagement: <https://calswec.berkeley.edu/father-engagement-and-father-involvement-toolkit/engagement-communication-tools>

Information for birth parents. Birth parents should be encouraged—not only by agency staff, but by their own attorneys, advocates, and peer mentors—to work with foster parents. Agencies can support birth parents' ability and willingness to co-parent by establishing birth parent mentoring programs and involving the parents' attorneys in the process of change. Additionally, agencies can support messaging about co-parenting by providing programming that gives birth parents clear, relevant information about the child welfare system in which they are involved.

- Sonoma County, CA has developed a parent mentor and system orientation program that introduces birth parents to the child welfare system with the support of a birth parent peer: <https://calparents.org/what-we-do/parent-support-services/parent-mentor-orientation-program.html>



[Discussing conventional introduction meetings.] "[Y]ou're in a room at a table with the social worker leading the conversation, and it doesn't give much room, it starts off, 'Hey, you're over here, and you're over here. And we're going to do this conversation, but these are the things you can't talk about, and these are the things you can talk about.' And I think that sometimes that, while it's a good idea in theory, we want that opportunity to meet and talk, I think maybe some changes about how it's held or how it's done would make it more of a partnership."

Dominique, foster parent, California



At Start of Placement

As we discussed in Section 1, practices that facilitate early connections between birth parents and foster parents and allow parents to share their intentions, address possible misconceptions, share valuable information about providing care for the child, and offer reassurance that the child is safe in the hands of people who have their best interests at heart. Agencies can support early connections by standardizing routine early contact, in a number of different formats, facilitated by case workers.



“As foster care workers, we sit down with the investigator and we prep them a little for whenever they go out [for a removal]. Sometimes we may not be able to go out with them to the removal. So, we prep them on what they need to tell the parents, what’s going to be going on, that we are going to make sure that once we get to the foster home, we are going to call them, to make sure they have a phone available.”

Kayla, case manager, Louisiana



Comfort calls. This practice, sometimes also referred to as an “initial call,” was originally developed at the suggestion of youth and a birth parent participating in an agency’s QPI implementation process. Given its success, it has since been replicated in agencies across the country. Immediately upon placement, or at most within the first 24 hours after a child is placed in

a foster home, the placement worker facilitates a call between the foster and birth parents to establish an initial connection. These calls serve several purposes, all of which contribute to the development of a successful co-parenting relationship. Comfort calls can reassure birth parents that their children are safe and that the system is supporting them in maintaining connection with their children. If the child is old enough to talk on the phone, an initial call immediately after placement can also comfort both birth parents and children in the wake of a painful separation. The birth and foster parents can also talk briefly to introduce themselves by name, share any critical information, and confirm intentions to continue communicating.

- Nevada’s “DCFS Comfort Call Procedures” offer concrete guidance for workers about how to conduct a comfort call and which topics and types of information to cover during the call: <http://www.qpinevada.org/documents/rural/DCFS%20Comfort%20Call%20Procedures.pdf>
- Louisiana’s “Initial Call Practice Guide” is a similar example that also describes the outcomes signaling a successful comfort call: <http://www.dcms.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/Initial%20Call%20Practice%20Guide.pdf>
- QPI Minnesota’s “Comfort Call Guide” includes tips specifically to foster parents: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c4f369bb27e391407cabe68/t/5d25f3106a89ba0001cf98b4/1562768144721/a_guide_to_comfort_calls_qpi+7+19.pdf

Icebreaker meetings. An icebreaker meeting (sometimes referred to as a “meet-and-greet”) at the beginning of a placement builds upon the connection established during the initial comfort call to further develop the partnership between the birth and foster parents. During this meeting, an agency worker facilitates a conversation in which the birth family and the foster family get to know each other and begin laying the groundwork for a co-parenting relationship.



“The biggest thing that settled me down was the first time that we met, she said, ‘I’m not here to take your kid. I’m here to support you to get your kid back.’ And that was the biggest thing that kept pushing me. I appreciate my foster mom.”

Mike, birth parent, California



Like the comfort call, this meeting can serve a variety of purposes. An icebreaker can permit a foster parent to state their intention to work with the birth parents and to support reunification. For birth parents, an icebreaker provides a chance to meet their child’s caregiver face-to-face and to share important information about the child’s needs and interests. It is also a time when the birth parents and foster parents can discuss how they will communicate with each other in an ongoing way and define their expectations for the relationship. Children who are old enough can be present for the icebreaker meeting, sharing information about what they need and observing their birth and foster parents working together for their benefit.

- Louisiana’s “Icebreaker Practice Guide” offers thorough guidance on facilitating icebreakers, including considerations for developing agendas, scheduling meetings, and supporting information-sharing: <http://www.dcms.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/Icebreaker%20Practice%20Guide.pdf>

Shared Family Care:

An Innovative Whole Family Approach

The ideal way to bridge the gap between birth parents and foster parents is to eliminate the gap entirely. Shared Family Care is a model that accomplishes this. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting-services/familycare/>

[gov/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/Icebreaker%20Meetings%20Practice%20Guide.pdf](https://www.qpimn.org/assets/docs/searchable/QPI/Icebreaker%20Meetings%20Practice%20Guide.pdf)

- Minnesota has developed a variety of support resources for the start of placement. For guidance on icebreaker meetings, see specifically “A Guide to Circle of Support Meeting” and the “Circle of Support Meeting Template”: <https://www.qpimn.org/practice-guides>

Partnership agreements. A partnership agreement (sometimes referred to as a “co-parenting agreement”) documents the expectations and respective roles of the agency worker, foster parents, and birth parents as they work in partnership on behalf of the child. Social workers use this document to review these expectations

and roles with the foster parents and with the birth parents, resolve any questions or misconceptions, and commit to abide by mutually-understood expectations by signing the agreement. Discussion of and commitment to a partnership agreement helps create clarity and accountability for both workers and parents, providing all parties with a written reference to point to.

- Ventura County, CA has developed a model partnership agreement which numerous jurisdiction have adopted and tailored to reflect their specific agency practices and policies: <http://www.qpicalifornia.org/documents/systemDocs/FosterVCKidspartnerhsipplanFINAL.pdf>

Throughout Placement

After the placement is made and parents have established a basis for their co-parenting relationship, agencies must engage in ongoing support for both families and their partnership if the relationship is to thrive. These interventions can take the form of planning for supportive meetings and visitation, training and informational resources, staffing to meet specific needs, and parent support programming, among other supports. Agencies must keep in mind that maintaining and developing the fledging relationship between birth and foster parent pairs is just as crucial as establishing initial contact.

Child and family team meetings.

Referred to variously as CFTs, CFTMs, or family team meetings, these facilitated meetings are a natural forum for birth parents and foster parents to share their intentions and expectations for their co-parenting relationship, exchange information, and plan to respond to concerns and outstanding issues that arise in the course of discussing the placement. While this type of team meeting is commonly used in child welfare practice, CFT meetings are not always conducted in ways that are supportive of co-parenting partnerships. Whenever possible, CFT meetings that support birth and foster parent partnerships will involve both families and their identified supporters (including the child when developmentally appropriate), set clear goals for meetings, provide processes for resolving conflicts and disagreements, and take a strengths-based approach to supporting necessary change. Agencies should also ensure that structures are in place for educating families about the nature and purpose of CFT meetings, including the process by which families can request a meeting, and for communicating with all parties involved when a meeting has been or needs to be convened.



- Calaveras County, CA provides a brochure to birth and foster parents that explains essential information about CFT meetings’ purpose, goals, team composition, and other useful facts. They have also developed a satisfaction survey for CFT meeting participants to gauge the effectiveness of meetings. http://www.qpicalifornia.org/documents/systemDocs/Calaveras_FTM_Brochure.pdf and http://qpi4kids.org/documents/bestPractices/familyTeamMeetingSatisfactionSurvey_082318.pdf



“I remember the first time she invited me to her home, I’m like, ‘What? I get to go to her house? I’m going to see where she lives!’ And that was big, to see how my child interacts there in their family, and it’s not just for show. I think when I got to see it, it was really able to sink in, and I understood that my child was OK.”

Janel, birth parent, California



Fostering Relationships in Visitation (FRV). The Fostering Relationships in Visitation model (formerly known as ABC-V) was developed in partnership by QPI and Dr. Mary Dozier, Chair of Child Development at the University of Delaware. This visitation model supports co-parenting relationships and improves a young child’s experience of visitation by engaging the foster parent as a coach and mentor in visits between the birth parent and the child. Foster parents participating in FRV are provided training on how to encourage healthy interactions between birth parents and their children while modeling evidence-based parenting strategies, such as following the child’s lead, to strengthen birth parents’ parenting skills and increase satisfaction with visits for everyone involved.

- FRV is an evidence-based model developed through a research process that tested the success of visits when the foster parent was trained to provide coaching versus a control group for which no training or support were provided. The “ABC-V Introductory Materials” document describes the research process and includes materials that were provided to participants: <http://qpinevada.cbcs.usf.edu/documents/abcv-introMaterials.pdf>
- Saint A in Minnesota adopted the FRV program to improve visitation outcomes for young children and describes the program structure and outcomes on its website: <https://sainta.org/news-and-stories/pilot-program-includes> and <http://sainta.org/abc-v-is-now-fostering-relationships/>

Parent mentor programs. Both birth and foster parents can benefit from the mentorship of their peers who have had experience in co-parenting partnerships. Agencies can develop peer mentorship programs to ensure that parents in either role are supported by the guidance and experience of others who have been in their position. Mentors can offer guidance on navigating the relationship, coordinating with workers and services, and ensuring that the co-parenting partnership remains strong and effective. Agencies can design mentoring programs such that birth and foster parent mentors work in teams to support parents, creating a higher-quality, more sustainable support structure for co-parents.

- Through QPI, Ventura County, CA created a Peer Partner Educator (PPE) program that includes foster parent mentors who support families in navigating partnerships. Ventura County’s “Layers of Support for Resource Families” brochure describes this and other foster parent support resources the agency provides: http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/bestPractices/2017_fostervckids_layers_of_support.pdf

http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/bestPractices/2017_fostervckids_layers_of_support.pdf

- Children’s Home+Aid, a QPI site in Illinois, developed a foster parent mentoring program focused on shared parenting as an outcome: http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/2017_newSitesConference/Foster%20Parent%20Mentoring%20Manual%20-%20CHA.pdf
- The birth parent mentor program in Sonoma County, CA matches peer mentors who have successfully regained custody of their own children with birth parents currently working towards reunification with their children, and supports birth parents in partnering with foster parents: <https://calparents.org/what-we-do/parent-support-services/parent-mentor-orientation-program.html>
- The Extra Mile in Lafayette Parish, LA also offers both birth and foster parent mentors. The mentors, or “parent partners” as they are called in this program, support the birth parent and foster parent in working successfully together: <https://theextramileregioniv.com/frc/>



“We started looking at the difference that mentoring was making in other states. Through the parent partner program that we have, that we are desperately hoping to expand in Louisiana, they do a lot of supporting of the birth parent through the process. I always think of it as a translation system explaining the system to the birth parent and the birth parent to the system.”

Evangeline, program director, Louisiana



Combined trainings and support groups for birth parents and foster parents. One of the pivotal ways that agencies can support co-parenting relationships is by providing birth and foster parents with shared training opportunities in which both families receive the same information. Being presented with the same information and opportunities can build a sense of genuine partnership between birth and foster parents, as they have the opportunity to compare notes and strategize together on how to use new information in their co-parenting practice. In QPI jurisdictions, birth and foster parents participating in trainings together have the opportunity meet one another as peers in a context outside the one-on-one co-parenting relationship, and they benefit from a learning experience enhanced by the presence of perspectives from the other side of the parenting relationship. Many jurisdictions also include child welfare agency staff in these joint trainings so all parties receive the same information and are more likely to empathize and openly communicate with one another.



“Now we are able to give so much information to the foster parents. Before they really didn’t know much, and they didn’t know how to work with the children because they didn’t know a whole lot. But now with us being able to share a whole lot more, it’s definitely helping preserve placements. Kids are staying in placements longer now.”

Kayla, case manager, Louisiana



Partnership facilitator staff. Agencies implementing partnership practices may wish to identify a staff member who is a passionate champion for co-parenting and is skilled at working with and listening to families, and task that person with overseeing practice change. A child welfare agency may even set up a unit specifically dedicated to supporting birth and foster parent partnerships.

- In San Francisco County, CA, their agency created a new unit with partnership facilitators specifically dedicated to working with families to support strong parent-caregiver collaborations: www.qpi4kids.org/documents/bestPractices/partnerPamphlets.pdf

Alternatives to in-person contact when necessary. Some circumstances require birth parents and foster parents to communicate through means other than in-person contact. For example, parents can use a shared notebook or journal that they pass back and forth, or that the social worker passes, containing updates and information about the child. Phone calls, Facetime, Skype, and similar platforms for audio and video calls are also good options for virtual visitation when in-person meetings cannot happen.

- A 2020 QPI webinar presentation from Dr. Rachel Barr, Director of the Georgetown Early Learning Project, offers research-based recommendations for supporting successful virtual visitation during crisis or when in-person visitation is impossible for other reasons: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/ylc/mediaeffect/qpistart.html>
- A handout from a 2017 QPI National Conference presentation contains suggestions for bridging the gap of separation between children and birth parents: http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/2017_newSitesConference/Foster%20Parents-Bridge%20Gap.pdf

Information-sharing agreements and policies. Myths about what information agencies may share with foster parents about birth parents can create barriers to strong birth and foster parent partnerships, and workers must be equipped with clear guidance on what they may and may not disclose. Clear legal analysis of confidentiality policies can help, but setting strong communication guidelines may also require changes to policies and procedures if they are no longer current. However, if birth and foster parents have a close partnership, confidentiality limitations can become less relevant to workers, as the birth parents themselves can decide what information they choose to share with the foster parents.

- Nevada’s QPI Child Welfare Workgroup developed an updated information-sharing policy to clarify what information must, may, and may not be shared with caregivers: <http://www.qpi4kids.org/documents/infosharing/Information.Sharing.6.2015.pdf>
- The California Department of Social Services, has provided an extensive information-sharing policy, informed by QPI practices, including timelines for when information should be shared and legal references: http://www.qpicalifornia.org/documents/systemDocs/I-05_14.pdf



“She helped me out so much with my kids being with her. Just having those phone calls. Just knowing that my child was ok. She would call me and ask me questions about my oldest. And then when I got my kids home, we still had the relationship, and then we transitioned. It was so easy.”

Ashley, birth parent, Nevada



During a Placement Change

When birth parents and foster parents plan together to do what is best for the child during a period of change, they can collaboratively plan to mitigate the harm to the children that the trauma and loss of a transition will cause. Agencies should view birth and foster parents as expert partners who possess intimate, detailed knowledge of the child in care and can work closely with the caseworker to support transition planning in ways that best meet the child's emotional and developmental needs.

Parent-led transition plans. As discussed in Section 1, planful transitions are a foundational element of successful reunification. Birth and foster co-parents with a strong relationship are in the best position to develop a placement transition plan that will protect the child's relationships and maintain consistency between homes. Agencies can request that co-parents develop a transition plan informed by their knowledge of the child, which can then be presented to the social worker for approval and support for implementation.

- Sonoma County, CA's "Transition Planning for Children in Care Mission Statement" centers input from birth and foster parents in the transition-planning process: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/2019nationalconf/protectingrelationships/transitionplanmissionstatement.pdf>

Transition process. To support co-parents in taking the lead when developing a transition plan for their child, caseworkers should ensure that specific elements are addressed by the plan before it is approved. Case workers can use a set of transition-planning standards or a transition planning checklist, shared with the co-parenting team, to guarantee that core aspects of the child's needs and agency requirements are considered during the planning process and that co-parents are included throughout the transition.

- Lake Charles, Louisiana's transitions checklist and calendar itemizes the key elements of a smooth transition for children in care: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/qpi/2019nationalconf/protectingrelationships/transitionchecklistsandcalendar.pdf>



"Thankfully, for every foster child we've had whose parents got them back, they are still in our life. We spend holidays with them. It is a good thing that we continue that bond and break away softly for those children because we don't want to hurt them anymore than they were already hurt the first time."

Ruby, foster parent, Louisiana



After Reunification/ Adoption

Agencies must maintain a clear stance that the end of a placement is not synonymous with the end of a child's relationships. Moreover, agencies should intentionally support the continuation of relationships after permanency. As discussed in Section 1, maintaining relationships after reunification or other permanency outcome is a predictor in the ultimate success of permanency because of the additional layers of support it provides for the child, birth parent, and foster parent alike.

In many cases, families that have developed strong, supportive co-parenting relationships will be naturally motivated to maintain connections with one another after the end of a placement. Birth and foster parents often find immense value in the mutual support their relationship has provided throughout the case, and find that foster and biological children have developed close relationships that should be sustained and nurtured. Even if

the birth family is unable to resume care of their child, many birth families in QPI jurisdictions have remained part of the extended caregiving family after adoption or other permanency arrangement, serving as an additional supportive figure for their biological child and other children in the family, as well as remaining a friend to the new parents.

While permanency workers should of course provide support for the continuation of relationships, even before reaching the point of permanency agencies can use a variety of methods to ensure that parents will anticipate continuing relationships after the placement ends. Staff can normalize the concept with parents by discussing permanency as potentially involving a continued supportive relationship between families. Agencies can invite co-parents who have maintained relationships to speak about their ongoing partnership at orientations and training, and can encourage peer mentors to discuss the possible continuation of relationships with their mentees. Case workers can also include continued connections as an element of the transition-planning process whenever appropriate, and permanency workers can follow-up on the continuation of relationships as outlined in the transition plan as a component of supporting permanency.



"No matter how a case ends, every child deserves to keep everybody in their life that they love, as long as it's safe. That is the purpose of partnership. No matter what, this child shouldn't have to have split loyalty and miss their mom or miss their foster mom or their siblings or new friends. They should get to keep everybody. Partnership is an opportunity for that."

Jody, birth parent mentor, California



5. Implementation Tips

During the 2018 regional birth and foster parent convenings, QPI jurisdictions that have implemented promising practices and experienced success in supporting co-parenting partnerships also shared tips for sustaining implementation. Beyond the initial implementation process, agencies must be committed to the longevity of its support for birth and foster parent partnerships by taking intentional measures to ensure that change is sustainable. The implementation recommendations below offer supplementary tips for supporting families, holding the course through the ongoing change process, and making ongoing improvements.

Supporting Families

In order for agencies to adequately support birth and foster parent partnerships, they must acknowledge racial, cultural, and economic status dynamics across families and remain cognizant of the unique needs of relative caregivers. The following are recommendations for ways to ensure that any practices implemented to support co-parenting partnerships are truly supportive of all families.



Support cultural responsiveness and address race and/or class issues. Birth parents are experts in their own culture and family traditions and can teach foster parents how to incorporate the children's culture and traditions into their new family. Foster parent recruitment processes should seek parents from demographics representative of the children and families the agency serves, and foster parent training should incorporate principles of cultural responsiveness throughout. Case workers should be prepared to mediate conflicts because of cultural misunderstandings or inaccurate assumptions based on differences in background.

Be aware of power dynamics. Support for co-parenting partnerships must take into account birth parents' and foster parents' relative positions in society and the imbalances that those differences may create in the relationship. Strengths-based approaches and mutual, equal respect for all participants will go a long way in countering these dynamics.

Tailor practices for the unique needs of relative caregivers. Relative caregivers need specific supports related to their circumstances and the dynamics they experience within their family, particularly with respect to the birth parents. Relatives may need help setting clear boundaries with birth parents while simultaneously partnering to co-parent with them, and may also need support in healing relationships before a co-parenting partnership becomes possible. Caseworkers should recognize that relative caregivers will be navigating pre-existing relationship dynamics rather than establishing new ones, complicating the usual process of establishing a co-parenting relationship. Agency staff should be aware of and prepared to address the specific needs of a relative caregivers and should develop processes specific to the beginning of a relative caregiver placement. Agencies may also consider developing peer mentorship programming specifically for relative caregivers.

Ensure foster parents are treated as respected, valued members of the child welfare team before introducing new practices or expectations around co-parenting. Foster parents need to feel confident that the agency and workers will support and trust them in working with the birth parent and will be available for assistance when challenges arise. Agencies should ensure that any allegations or concerns birth parents raise while the co-parenting relationship is developing are handled through a respectful, problem-solving approach rather than through a punitive licensing investigative process. Additionally, in order to support foster parents in successfully co-parenting, agencies may need to relinquish fears about liability and expectations of maintaining control over birth and foster parent relationships.

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

“If we really want true transformation, and we want to see the system change in a way that is extremely significant, we have to allow young people and parents to design it, and then we, the system partners and professionals, have to figure out how to make that happen with them and alongside them, not for them.”

Brandy, lived experience advocate,
Virginia



Use strengths-based language when framing conversations about birth and foster parent partnerships. The language and habits of speech that social workers inherit from the conventions of their field can sometimes carry negative implications and communicate damaging messages regardless of intent. How agencies communicate with birth and foster parents and talk about co-parenting is impactful. Language that assumes parents are incapable of understanding certain information or which casts parents in a negative light dismisses parents’ abilities and discourages collaboration, and can ultimately undermine parents’ trust in

the agency. To promote a collaborative, respectful environment, agency staff should commit to using strengths-based rather than deficit-based language, while being direct and honest with parents about challenges and the steps needed to address them.¹⁵

Holding the Course

Once an agency is engaged in culture change and the implementation of new practices is underway, it is important to sustain stakeholders’ sense of investment and motivation and to plan for resistance and potential pitfalls. Agencies will be more successful in sustaining implementation if they are prepared to leverage successes for continued momentum, proactively address resistance, and engage stakeholders who can contribute to the overall strength of the change initiative.

Communicate and celebrate successes. Agencies should celebrate their successes, even small ones, in implementing new practices and policies that support co-parenting partnerships. The culture change process should include time to recognize the progress being made and to acknowledge specific staff and caregivers who have become early implementers of new practices and policies. For example, some agencies in QPI jurisdictions post signs in agency office hallways that feature staff who exemplify desired changes or publicly acknowledge those early implementers—both staff and caregivers—in meetings. Such acknowledgement communicates to stakeholders that change is in fact making a difference and that leaders are aware of the efforts being made toward implementation.

Use success stories to leverage further change. Change can be difficult and, consequently, the momentum of change can feel discouragingly slow. When



¹⁵ For more information about using strength-based language, see CWLA’s Strength-Based Child Welfare Words and Expressions at: <https://www.fosterparentcollege.com/info/strengthbased.jsp>.

day-to-day child welfare practice is already challenging, staff and caregivers can find it hard to stay motivated to experiment and take on the risk of new practices. Sharing stories about how new practices and policies are resulting in positive change for children and families can reinvigorate people to keep working toward system improvements. In particular, hearing directly from parent-caregiver pairs about the successes of their partnership, or from youth about positive changes they're experiencing, can boost motivation for staff who need more than abstract explanations of the benefits of co-parenting. Agencies can then use such success stories to generate support from other key community partners.

- Ventura County, CA's Children and Family Services Agency developed a short video featuring a birth parent-foster parent pair discussing their partnership. The agency showed the film at a county Board of Supervisors meeting. After seeing the video, supervisors expressed their strong support for parent partnerships, noting that the video had given them a concrete picture of the benefits of this practice.¹⁶
- In Florida, the QPI team made its 2019 focus area celebrating reunification in the same way adoption is celebrated, and they used that opportunity to engage judiciary and court stakeholders. QPI champions provided dependency judges with Reunification Month¹⁷ Kits, including paper hands representing children from their county who were successfully reunified over the year, and shared stories of the partnerships that resulted in those outcomes. After seeing these hand decorations displayed in other courtrooms, judges were excited to join in the spirit of celebration and feature similar displays in their own courtroom. This celebration became an

opportunity to educate and engage court and legal stakeholders and help them better understand the importance of co-parenting partnerships.

Recognize that systems change is hard and takes time. As the agency engages in the process of change, there will be both progress and setbacks on the road to implementation. Some barriers to change may seem insurmountable until the right solution is developed. When leaders acknowledge the difficulty of change and the inevitability of pitfalls, stakeholders implementing those changes will feel recognized for the effort they're investing in implementation and more confident that leadership has a realistic view of the change initiative.

Anticipate and proactively plan for resistance. In general, people are resistant to change. Leaders can use their experiences from past system reform efforts to anticipate resistance, implement strategies that reduce resistance, listen to concerns as they arise, and work with agency staff to address concerns, all while maintaining a clear message about the direction in which the agency is moving. Leaders can identify early implementers who are respected by their peers and use them to influence their colleagues who are more resistant to change. Similarly, some caregivers who have been fostering for a long time under different models of fostering may need help reframing how they view their role and concrete strategies for changing practice to include interacting with birth parents. Caregivers who already work with birth parents can help guide more resistant or apprehensive caregivers towards new ways of fostering. Consistently sharing the research and positive impacts of this new practice model can help all stakeholders understand why and how to adapt their own work.

Engage the legal community.

Educating and engaging the legal community is an essential component of sustaining birth and foster parent partnerships as a core practice. Court decisions and attorney advocacy can eliminate barriers to birth and foster parent partnerships, especially in addressing myths or concerns about safety, confidentiality, or family time. As an agency begins to change practice to support partnerships, agency leaders can invite attorneys and court personnel to discuss the value of birth and foster parent partnerships, to identify legal and court barriers, and to develop solutions. The conversation can include hearing directly from foster youth, birth parents, and foster parents about how this practice shift will benefit them. Agency leaders, parents, and caregivers can address any safety, confidentiality or other concerns attorneys and judges may have.



“Our court system now is even on board with us a little. They are recognizing what we are doing. They are even noticing that the parents’ relationship with the agency is better now. Sometimes they say, ‘We don’t really have time to get to know what this is all about.’ That kind of thing. But now our two judges, they’re excited about it, and they notice the big difference.”

Kayla, case manager, Louisiana



QPI sites in Nevada, Louisiana, Florida, and California have all developed and delivered specialized trainings for court stakeholders that provide information about the research underlying the partnership approach and how court practice impacts partnership

¹⁶ See http://ventura.granicus.com/player/clip/5233?view_id=67.

¹⁷ ABA National Reunification Month resources and information https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/project-areas/national-reunification-month/

outcomes. In Florida, QPI worked to revise the Juvenile Dependency Court Benchbook to remove barriers to co-parenting and partnership, including the following court guidance: “Judges should ensure that the caseworker, parent, and caregiver coordinate visitation and other activities. Parents may be able to join their child and the child’s caregiver at medical appointments, school activities, birthday parties, holiday summer activities, and other events in the child’s life.”¹⁸

Invest in strong parent leadership.

Parent leaders bring knowledge, energy, and commitment to culture change that benefits foster children and their families. Parents have a tremendous amount invested in the quality of care the child welfare system can provide, and they play an important role in seeing change through to full implementation. They bring an invaluable perspective on change, as they see both the direct benefits of practices like birth and foster parent partnerships and the system barriers to these practices from a position outside the agency. They are also most deeply familiar with what works and does not work to support them as parents. Having parent leader voices at the table throughout the culture change process, not only in the initial discussion stages, will help ensure that the process remains grounded in reality and that solutions are practical. Agencies can offer leadership training to birth and foster parents or support them in gaining leadership skills and experience in other ways. Peer mentor programs for birth parents and foster parents also help support them as leaders. Welcoming parents’ voices, experiences, concerns, and recommendations, and treating them as experts and peers, will go a long way to support their ongoing involvement as leaders in system improvement efforts.

Remember why the changes are necessary. In the course of pouring time and effort into the change process, it can be easy for staff and other stakeholders to lose sight of the reasons for doing this work. Agencies can commit to routinely reminding stakeholders of why change is necessary to help sustain motivation, keep the work grounded in its foundational principles, and maintain a focus on the needs of children. A change process that remains cognizant of its original purpose ensures that implementation decisions are rooted in the goals of system improvement. As policies and practices are tested in the field and new information about promising practice becomes available, leaders can also provide updated messages about their vision for the work and bring in experts who validate the rationale for making changes.

Making Ongoing Improvements

Culture change is an iterative and ongoing process. To ensure that the changes being made are accomplishing the desired goals, agencies should have a system for tracking outcomes and adjusting new practices and policies as needed to better reach the desired outcomes.

Track outcomes. The purpose of systems-change is to get better results, and outcome tracking over time will tell the agency if the implemented changes are doing so. Data that shows better outcomes for children and families as a result of change will help leaders justify the resources they are putting towards the new practices and lend credibility to the initiative. Data showing positive outcomes also keeps up the momentum for change and reassures stakeholders that they are on the right track.

Additionally, tracking outcomes is a way to hold agency leaders and staff accountable for the efficacy of newly-implemented practices. When the data isn’t showing the desired results, agencies know that they must adjust their new practices and policies accordingly. Agencies need to ensure that the outcomes being tracked are the right ones for the system change goals, and that the outcomes tracked are directly affected by the changes being implemented. Examples of possible approaches to tracking outcomes include measuring the percent of new placements where a comfort call or icebreaker was conducted, surveying parents or youth about the quality of parent partnerships, or monitoring changes in metrics like placement stability, reunification, and decreased re-entries into foster care.

Have a feedback loop that engages parents broadly and continuously.

As new practices are implemented, agencies need to check in regularly with the people most affected by those practice, to determine whether or not they’re working as intended, and must be prepared to make additional changes based on the feedback they receive. In an implementation process where people with lived experience have offered suggestions for how to improve practices, leaders must also follow up with them to show them how their input has served and continues to serve as a catalyst for practice improvements. Agencies can build such a feedback loop process into their overall family engagement strategy in order to supplement quantitative data with qualitative input directly from families, drive continuous improvements, and deepen the strong agency-parent partnerships on which change implementation relies.

¹⁸ https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/216000/1961946/Floridas_Dependency_Benchbook_FamilyTimeVisitationProtocols.pdf

• • • • •
“I have the most amazing foster parents. Honestly, I would have given up a long time ago, I would have given my child up a long time ago. But these people took a chance. [...] My heart is so full because of my foster family. I’m out here on my own. I’ve been out here for a few years, and I don’t really have a lot of people, but they accepted me.”

Ash, birth parent, California

• • • • •

Final Words of Encouragement

The most important lesson from the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership work documented in this toolkit is that having birth parents, foster parents, and foster youth fully involved and engaged in identifying issues and solutions is the only way to achieve meaningful system-change and improve child welfare practice. This work grew out of the recommendations of youth, foster parents, and birth parents and has been implemented by leaders committed to working with those stakeholders as full partners in change. Agency leaders have the opportunity to make child welfare a positive intervention if they listen to those individuals who are most impacted and if they align their policies and practices with recommendations from those individuals. Additionally, allowing parents and youth to lead the way towards change gives the agency the opportunity to work towards restoring the power and strength of families and youth.

Over the past decade, birth parent and foster parent leaders in QPI jurisdictions have worked in partnership with child welfare agencies to change practices and policies in their own communities and to change the child welfare field’s expectations and vision for birth and foster parent partnerships. The national Birth and Foster Parent Partnership is committed to lifting up the work of these leaders, engaging and supporting more parent leaders to work with more jurisdictions, and moving the field to embrace partnership parenting as the only appropriate way to parent children in foster care. While the lessons, practices, and tools shared in this toolkit were developed in QPI jurisdictions, we hope they will be applied in every jurisdiction across the country.

We believe the examples of impact already made by parents working in partnership with agencies will offer hope to families, youth, and the child welfare field about the promise of reform led in partnership with those most impacted. As we have seen, the system can change and be more responsive to the needs of children and families. Birth and foster parent partnerships are about relationships, and relationships are at the heart of successful practice. Culture change is hard, but parent partnerships and other innovative practices that support relationships are already making a positive difference in child and family wellbeing.

A publication of the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, created with parents, in collaboration with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative and Casey Family Programs.

