

1. Building the Relationship

Building a positive relationship between the birth parent and the foster parent/kinship caregiver at the beginning of the placement can help create a smooth transition so that the children or youth are able to experience the love, support and care of two families. When both families are willing to work together to coordinate the care of the children or youth, it allows them to maintain a sense of identity and family history and helps them understand the new relationships in their life. It also helps the birth parent and the foster parent feel more supported. Positive relationships lead to:

- Supporting regular open communication about ways the parents can meet the specific needs of the child or adolescent.
- Helping both families get questions answered.
- Keeping routines and traditions for the child or adolescent as consistent as possible.

Two particular strategies, comfort calls and in-person family introductory meetings, can help to begin the relationship building process by talking about important background information relating to the children or youth and also learning more about one another. Comfort calls usually happen within 24 hours of the children or youth being placed in a home. Social workers can request permission from birth parents to share their telephone number. This is usually the first time that the birth and foster parents will begin talking with one another. An in-person family introductory meeting (also referred to as an icebreaker meeting) is best held within three to five days after placement and is another way to help build this connection.

Other creative ideas for initial relationship building situations include: a meeting at the hospital or medical center, team meetings and group orientations or trainings. Because Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) frequently have contact with birth parents and foster parents during visits with children, they are in a unique position to talk with them about the positive impact of partnering together to help meet the needs of the children or youth

in care. All of these strategies support the relationship building process by providing an opportunity for:

- The birth parent to develop a sense of being respected for what he/she knows about his/her child and the foster parents being accepted as a support for the children or youth.
- The foster parent/kinship caregiver to let the birth parent know of his/her interest in working in partnership with the parent to minimize the trauma of foster care and support reunification.
- Both sets of parents to talk about the unique needs and interests of the children or youth in care (e.g., sleeping habits, food preferences, likes and dislikes, etc.).

Equally important is recognizing and creating healthy dialogue between foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents on topics to recognize the individuality of the children or youth in care and their families.

It is important to consider:

- Different parenting styles and discipline practices
- Cultural beliefs and traditions
- Ethnic practices
- Sexual identification and the need to be sure that all people are free from any form of discrimination
- Religious beliefs and the importance of supporting any existing religious beliefs and practices of the child.
- Medical/dental history
- Other daily practices (e.g., haircare, grooming, hygiene and nutrition)

It could be uncomfortable for the foster parent/kinship caregiver or the birth parent to discuss some of these issues. If you do not know how to approach a certain subject, it is best to ask for more information in a respectful and caring manner.

“As a foster parent, I have deep appreciation for the challenges faced by birth parents when their children are placed in the foster care system and in my home. My goal is to do all I can to help them achieve their goals of getting their children back home. After they are reunified, I try to stay in touch if that is welcomed by the birth parent and remain a support to the whole family.”

Robyn Robbins, foster parent (California)



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Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways to build a strong relationship with the foster parent/kinship caregiver through comfort calls and other introductory meetings to share your knowledge about your child, maintain a close bond and keep in regular contact with your child.</p>	<p>Suggested ways to build a strong relationship and support the birth parent in comfort calls and other introductory meetings to help you understand the experiences, culture, traditions and routines of the child so that you can better respond to the needs of the family.</p>
<p>Here are some ideas you may want to share or discuss during a comfort call or an in-person family introductory meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I really love and care about my child. <input type="checkbox"/> I am hoping that my child will be able to come back home to me. <input type="checkbox"/> I want to know how my child is doing. <input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know about my child’s medical information. <input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know what my child really likes. <input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know what my child doesn’t like. <input type="checkbox"/> I want you to know that my child needs this routine for bedtime. <input type="checkbox"/> I would like to know what school my child will attend. <input type="checkbox"/> I would like to know how many children you have cared for in your home. <p>You may wish to ask questions about where your child is placed and information about the foster parents/kinships caregivers such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What does your home look like? <input type="checkbox"/> Are there any other children in your home? <input type="checkbox"/> What does an average day in your house look like? <input type="checkbox"/> How will my child fit into your family? <input type="checkbox"/> How do you handle discipline in your family? <p>It would be valuable for you to share your child’s sleeping habits, food preferences, likes and dislikes, medical issues, school progress and other relevant information to help the foster parent/kinship caregiver provide a smooth adjustment for your child.</p>	<p>Here are some ways that you can introduce yourself during the comfort call or in-person family introductory meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> “Hi – I am Betty, the foster parent taking care of your son for now. I can tell that he really misses you and his dad. I wanted to make sure that you knew who was taking care of Tommy and I would love for you to help me to do this.” <p>The foster parent/kinship caregiver may ask the birth parent questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have any ideas how I can help your child tonight? <input type="checkbox"/> What is your child’s favorite toy? Likes? Dislikes? <input type="checkbox"/> What is your child’s favorite song that he/she likes? <input type="checkbox"/> Does your child have a bedtime routine or any sleep habits? <input type="checkbox"/> How are you doing? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have anyone who can support you right now? <input type="checkbox"/> Can I tell your son or daughter that you are doing okay to help him or her feel more comfortable? <p>If you are comfortable doing so, you might share information about your family size and the ages and gender of the other children in your home. You may also want to describe a little about what your home looks like and the general neighborhood where you live.</p> <p>If the birth parent does not want to talk during the first comfort call, you may say you understand why they may be upset and ask if it would be okay to call back. Explain that you would like to share how their son or daughter is doing and also obtain ideas from the parent about how best to support their child at this challenging time.</p>
<p>Some suggested ways to talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about topics to recognize the individuality of your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to share information about how your child looks forward to certain religious holiday celebrations. For example, your child may wish to light Chanukah candles during this Jewish holiday. You may wish to ask to take your child to the synagogue to celebrate this time together. <input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to share how you help your daughter braid her hair. You might ask to arrange a weekly time to help her do this. <input type="checkbox"/> You might want to share your child’s likes or dislikes about different activities (e.g., playing in snow, riding a bicycle, etc.). <input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to talk about cultural opportunities for your teen such as participation in Tribal gatherings, LGTBQ and other support groups that meet regularly. 	<p>Some suggested ways to talk with the birth family about topics to recognize the individuality of their child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> You may be unsure about how to assist a child/youth with their grooming, haircare or hygiene due to their cultural upbringing. You might ask the birth parent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> “Do you have any advice on how to best help your child with their grooming and haircare – does she/he have any special clothing preferences?” <input type="radio"/> “Does your child have a favorite way of bathing – does he or she prefer a shower or bath?” <input type="checkbox"/> You may learn that the child or youth wishes to attend weekly religious services. You may wish to talk with the birth parents to make arrangements for this.