

## 2. Supporting the Relationship

Children and youth benefit and learn healthy communications skills when they see the foster parents/kinship caregivers and birth parents talking regularly in a positive manner. Seeing them all working together can help the children and youth realize that they do not have to choose one family over another. It also shows the child or adolescent that adults can get through difficult situations by communicating and supporting each other.

Open and ongoing communication between the foster parent/kinship caregiver, the birth parent and the child can help build trusting and lasting relationships. Birth parents may be more likely to stay connected and share information when the foster parent/kinship caregiver is willing to support and encourage the birth parent and child or youth to ask for help whenever needed. Regular communications between them can help them stay up-to-date on all matters relating to the child and family. It also can help clarify different or confusing feelings that the birth parent, child or youth may be experiencing during this period of time.

Maintaining regular contact through visits and sharing time together are other important ways to strengthen and support relationships between the foster parent/kinship caregiver, the birth parent, child or youth.

The foster parent/kinship caregiver can play a critical role in supporting positive, regular visitation between the birth parents, the child or youth and their siblings. Visits enable the child or youth to see that his or her family is okay. This family time together also gives everyone the opportunity to stay connected and work towards reunification together whenever possible. Talks between the foster parent/kinship caregiver and the birth parent can focus on ideas to make the visitation special and memorable for the child or youth. They can also talk about what works best so they can maximize quality time during the visits.

Other opportunities for foster parents/kinship caregivers to help promote family time together include:

- Encouraging birth parents to participate with them in their child's medical appointments, dental appointments, school conferences/events and court hearings.
- Encouraging birth parents to participate with them in family outings, trips to the park, birthday parties, holiday events and other special celebrations.
- Offering to drive the birth family to appointments and events.

*“It’s most effective when the foster parent and birth parent work together to coordinate their efforts in caring for a child, particularly relating to culture and traditions. This helps the children and youth maintain their own sense of identity, family history and also increases connections that help them understand the new relationships in their life. This partnership hastens stable reunification because the child has more supportive people in their constellations and research has shown that this is really important to the child’s future. These connections are critical to older youth who are close to aging out. In the end, this birth and foster parent partnership strengthens both families.”*

**Jessica Lloyd-Rogers, foster parent (Oregon)**

As a former foster parent and the current President of the Oregon Foster Parent Association, Jessica believes in keeping children and youth safe and surrounded by caring adults who help them grow to become confident, caring, competent and contributing adult members of their community.



*“There were barriers to staying connected to my mom while my siblings and I were in care. Because all our visits had to be supervised by a child welfare worker, it was difficult to work around everyone’s schedules. If there had been more time for us to be together as a family before reunification, it would have made things easier.”*

**Kodi Baughman, former foster youth (Iowa)**

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Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways to strengthen and build a stronger relationship with the foster parent/kinship caregiver by making regular efforts to stay connected and up-to-date about your child’s progress.</p>	<p>Suggested ways to strengthen and build a stronger relationship with the birth parent by discussing how both parties will regularly communicate and share information. In this way, you show respect for the birth parent by requesting his/her input in decision-making around their child.</p>
<p>Below are some suggested ways to regularly communicate with the foster parent/kinship caregiver and your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Let your children know that it is okay to be with their foster family while you work on getting stronger and healthier.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask the foster parent about setting up a regular time to talk about your son or daughter’s progress.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parents about texting or sending photos or short videos to you about your son or daughter.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask about obtaining art projects, grades and report cards from the foster parents/kinship caregivers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask about setting up phone calls and facetime chats with your son or daughter multiple times during the week.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to share parts of your story with those caring for your children and hearing theirs in return, which can help create trusted connections.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may wish to ask the foster parent to help you maintain strong connections between your child and any other siblings in the family and any other important relatives in the child’s life.</li> </ul>	<p>Below are some recommended communication strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You may suggest to the birth parent, “Let’s talk about what we will agree upon to share in information and how will we communicate back and forth about your son or daughter.”</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> You might also say: “You are the expert in knowing what your child needs. We really value your thoughts and recommendations relating to your child. We hope that you can help us with identifying how best to meet your child’s needs.”</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sharing parts of your story with the birth family and hearing theirs in return can help to create trusted connections.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk to the birth parents about the specific hygiene items they use with their child so that you can decide if you want to use the same products in your home.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage the child or youth to make cards or art projects as gifts for his or her family.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Support the child or adolescent in having contact with his or her siblings and other family members by telephone calls, emails, letters and cards.</li> </ul>
<p>Some suggested ways to get involved in visits and special family time with your child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about participating in your child’s medical appointments, dental appointments and school conferences/events. In some states, participation in these activities is a legal right of the birth parent.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> When invited by the foster parent/kinship caregiver, participate together with them in faith-based activities, family outings, birthday parties, holiday events and other special celebrations.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If your child is an infant or toddler, during visits, the foster parent/kinship caregiver may provide you with updates through written notes in your child’s diaper bag or a journal. If this happens, you may wish to respond back to the foster parent/kinship caregiver with your own thoughts about your child.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If needed, you could ask the foster parent/kinship caregiver to help with transportation to a visit or ask for a transportation voucher from your social worker.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about jointly approaching the social worker to request more visits in more natural settings (e.g., the foster parent/kinship caregiver’s home, playground, family resource center or other community space).</li> </ul>	<p>Some suggested ways to work with the birth parents to make the best of visits and special family time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Invite the birth parents, siblings or other family members to school functions, sporting events and community activities or a fun outing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If the child is an infant or toddler, provide the birth parent with regular updates about their child by sending special notes or a journal in a diaper bag or a small bag that the child carries with them during visits.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Offer to transport a parent and their child to a visit together.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Send the child or youth with all items that they might need during a visit with their parents (e.g., games, snacks and activities they can do with their parents).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Collaborate with the foster families of the siblings of the child or youth to plan joint activities regularly to help maintain sibling relationships during their separation.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Work with the birth parent to meet jointly with the social worker to discuss visitation plans such as increasing the frequency and length of visits and making arrangements for family visits to occur in the most natural setting possible.</li> </ul>