

### 3. Keeping the Relationship Strong while Working with the System and Planning for Reunification

While the children are in care, it will be important for the birth family and the foster parent/kinship caregiver to keep their relationship strong by working as a supportive and unified team. It is especially helpful when the foster parent/kinship caregiver and the birth parent decide together how they will share consistent information about the child with the various other professionals who may be involved in working with the family. Other professionals

may include social workers, medical and dental providers, schools, family members, special service providers and others. This will also help create a collaborative effort in helping the family work toward reunification or alternative living arrangements.

During this time, the birth parent may be working to fulfill all of the requirements of his/her case plan to seek reunification. The foster parent/kinship caregivers can look for ways to be supportive and the birth parent can keep the foster parent/kinship caregiver updated on their progress, concerns and any other important information. Birth and foster parents/kinship caregivers can work together to begin preparing the child for a positive reunification if that is part of the plan.



*“A strong relationship between a birth parent and foster parent can make a huge difference for a child and their birth family. I think it is awesome to know that your child is safe. I especially appreciate that the foster parent wants to know what practices I use to care for my child. I also have some comfort knowing that the foster parent cares about me. In this way, I can move forward with my own healing and also work on a plan for a better life for me and my family.”*

**Shana Hunts Along, birth parent (Minnesota)**



Shana is a citizen of Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. She overcame major substance use challenges and successfully turned her life around and reunified with her two children. Today, Shana works as a parent mentor and community outreach advocate with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Law Center in Minneapolis and she provides support to American Indian families affected by the child protection system. It was this center that successfully represented her when her child welfare case was open. Shana helped to create the Parent Mentor Program within the ICWA Law Center.

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Birth Parent	Foster Parent/Kinship Caregiver
<p>Suggested ways for keeping your relationship strong with the foster parent/kinship caregiver while working with the system and planning for reunification.</p>	<p>Suggested ways for keeping your relationship strong with the birth parents while working with the system and planning for reunification.</p>
<p>Ways for you to work in a team approach with the foster parent/kinship caregiver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about how the two of you can jointly approach the social worker to request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Access to resources from the department and other service providers to help you move toward reunification</li> <li><input type="radio"/> More frequent visits with the children</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Visits occurring in the most natural setting</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about holding regular family meetings to discuss ways to move forward with reunification or alternative living arrangements.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent/kinship caregiver about working together on a journal to help you see your child's progress and help you see your own growth in your parenting skills and also in your personal life.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent about preparing for the Citizen Review Board hearings. This hearing may result in recommendations to the judge and findings that support additional services to help achieve reunification.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask the foster parent to work with you to help your child feel prepared when it is time to leave the foster home to return to your home or to another placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent about how you would like to maintain contact with them after reunification or a change in your child's placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the foster parent about any broader policy changes you hope the two of you might recommend to the child welfare agency, the courts or other systems involved in your family's life.</li> </ul>	<p>Ways for you to work in a team approach with the birth parent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assist the birth parent in understanding the roles and responsibilities of the various service providers and systems who are involved with the child.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Advocate together with the birth parent to access all the services and resources needed to help the family reunify.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Work with the birth parent to meet jointly with the social worker to discuss visitation plans such as increased frequency and length of visits and for family visits to occur in the most natural setting possible.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Support the birth family in meeting together regularly as a family unit to discuss plans for working toward reunification or alternative living arrangements.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Work with the birth parent to create a journal that can help them see their child's progress and also their own personal growth and progress in developing their parenting skills.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Talk with the birth parent about ways to help the child prepare for leaving the foster home and returning back home to the family or to another placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities to celebrate successes of both the child or youth and the birth family.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask how you can continue to support the birth parent and the foster parent connections for the child after reunification or change in placement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Be open to talking with the birth parent about common interests in making some policy change recommendations to the child welfare agency or to the courts.</li> </ul>

*“My mom had worked on preparing to be the best mom she could be to get us back. I didn’t have the opportunity to work on anything that would help me grow and change. When we went home I was not prepared to be her child again. I was not ready for my mom to take on a parenting role. She had changed the way she was doing things to alleviate concerns from the system. I had always been just fine taking care of myself. This created a lot of growing pains and struggles in what should have been a happy and smooth transition back into the care of our mom.”*

Kodi Baughman, former foster youth (Iowa)

