

# Making a Difference by Maintaining Connections

By: Donna Gillespie Foster

When they're in foster care, one of the greatest gifts we can give young people is to help maintain--or strengthen--their connections to their families. To do this well, it really helps if we have good relationships with the birth families as well.

This isn't always easy. Working with birth parents and maintaining children's connections to them can be very challenging. In fact, maintaining connections often requires "out of the box" thinking and approaches.

## Attitude Matters

Children come into the care of foster, kinship, and adoptive parents because the birth parents have great needs of their own that prevent them from raising their children in a safe environment. Co-parenting with angry and hurt birth parents can be extremely difficult.

For my 17 years as a foster parent, I remember having to constantly think "out of the box" to build relationships with birth parents. Proving I am not judging them and that I am no better than them took a lot of effort. When I was successful, it was because I cultivated an attitude of humility and acceptance.

I tried to ask myself, "I haven't had their life struggles and experiences, so who am I to judge?" I don't want others to judge me. I knew I couldn't help birth families if I put expectations on them to live a certain way.

## Look for Signs of Success

Successful kinship, foster, and adoptive parents seem to have similar beliefs as to what their role is in helping children and their birth families. They also know success when they see it.

For example, you know you are successful when children can talk comfortably in front of you about their birth families without fear you will make hateful comments about them. Instead, they know they will hear you talk about the strengths of their parents.

## Moments for Teaching

Another indicator of success is when birth parents want you to help them learn safer and more loving ways to raise their children. This is a good sign that reunification may eventually occur.

I've got a great example of this. I know a couple that could not conceive. They hoped, one day, they could adopt to complete their family. When a newborn baby girl was placed in their home, this new foster mother attached to her quickly.

Now the goal for this child was reunification with her young birth mother. The foster mother wanted to meet the birth mother, so she brought the baby to the first visit.

Right away, the foster mother noticed the birth mother held her baby awkwardly. She did not hold the infant close and seemed confused.

Instead of judging this young woman, the foster mother gently said, "Your baby misses your heartbeat. She heard it for nine months and is bonded to you. Can I help you to hold her so she can lay her head on your heart?"

The young mother cried and said yes. In a few minutes, the birth mother was cuddling her baby, speaking softly to her and rocking her.

When the foster mother told me about this exchange I asked about her emotions, since I knew she would love to adopt this child. She simply said, "She wasn't my child. She was her baby. My baby will come later."

This foster mother respectfully shared parenting ideas with the birth mother. In time, the baby returned home.

#### After Reunification

It's an even greater success when kinship and foster parents stay connected to the birth family after reunification. When birth parents have ongoing support, it lessens the chance of children re-entering care.

Even if reunification can't happen, building relationships with birth parents can lead to success. When a parent realizes they love but cannot raise their child and relinquishes their parental rights to kinship, foster, or adoptive parents that, too, is success. And when relinquishment happens and there is a good relationship between the birth parent and adoptive parent, the child is more likely to stay connected to their birth family. This is good for the child.

#### Sibling Connections

Foster and adopted children struggle deeply when they are separated from their siblings. It is a great success when we can prevent this from happening.

I have seen foster and adoptive parents either have all of the siblings in their homes or, if that is not possible, take steps to ensure siblings have regular contact through life books and shared activities, celebrations, and playtimes. These families are really one huge family unit.

#### After Adoption

Even after adoption there can be real benefits to sustaining or recreating children's connections to their birth families. Consider this story of "out of the box" thinking.

A foster parent adopted a teen who had many placements over the course of six years. This teen had not seen her birth mother or siblings during all of those years. This adoptive mother saw how the youth anguished over not knowing her birth family and constantly searched for them.

After the adoption, she and her daughter found her daughter's birth mother. After making contact they started visits in the adoptive home and progressed to day-long visits in her birth family's home. Today, overnight visits with birth mom and siblings continue.

Are there are struggles? Yes. From guilt, the birth mom tries to be a friend to her child, rather than a parent. But the adoptive parent has to set healthy boundaries and things are going reasonably well. She does not intend to change her mind about including the birth family in their lives. She believes that if she is to attach successfully with her adoptive child, the child needs her birth family connections as well.

Donna Foster is a national trainer, consultant, and author of the series "Shelby and Me: Our Journey Through Life Books" ([reviewed](#) in *Fostering Perspectives*, vol. 20, no. 1).

#### Shared Parenting: Potential Benefits for Resource Parents (Foster, Relatives and Adoptive Parents)

Creating supportive relationships with birth parents may:

- Enhance child development, learning, and well-being by encouraging the child to return to the child role;
- Decrease children's defiant behavior by reducing their desire/need to demonstrate loyalty to birth family;
- Provide information and insights that enable foster parents to meet children's needs earlier and in a more effective way, thus helping children and reducing foster parent frustration;
- Reduce conflict with birth parents over various issues (e.g., grooming);
- Increase birth parent support for foster parents by reassuring them their children are being well cared for and that foster parents do not seek to replace them; and
- Create a positive connection between the foster parents, the child, and the child's family that will not have to end, even if the placement does.

Source: Russell & McMahon, 2005