

<b>ACF</b>  <b>Administration for Children and Families</b>	<b>U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES</b> <b>Administration on Children, Youth and Families</b>	
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**TO:** State, Tribal and Territorial Agencies Administering or Supervising the Administration of Titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act, and State and Tribal Court Improvement Programs.

**SUBJECT:** Foster Care as a Support to Families.

**LEGAL AND RELATED REFERENCES:** Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act (the Act).

**PURPOSE:** To provide information on best practices, resources, and recommendations for using foster care as a support for families in a way that mitigates the trauma of removal for the child and parents, expedites safe and successful reunification, and improves parent and child well-being outcomes. This Information Memorandum (IM) emphasizes the importance of state and tribal child welfare communities building and supporting relationships between resource families and parents<sup>1</sup> to facilitate improved engagement of parents, promote timely reunification, build protective capacities<sup>2</sup> in parents, and strengthen overall child and family well-being, while ensuring child safety.

As agencies begin the work to shift their system's culture by adopting a new vision for foster care as a support to families, it will be critical to help existing resource families adapt to this

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<sup>1</sup> CB is making a conscious effort to stop using the terms "birth parents" and "biological parents" and simply refer to a child's parents as parents. We are making this effort at the request of parents with lived experiences. Absent termination of parental rights, children have one set of legal parents and when needed, temporary caregivers. We believe that qualifying parents as "birth" parents or "biological" parents can be experienced as disempowering and can deemphasize the primacy of the parent child bond. CB is also making an effort to refer to "foster parents" as resource families as an effort to emphasize the enhanced role that resource families can play in the lives of children and their parents, serving as a support, as opposed to a placement alone. CB encourages all colleagues to make a similar effort to be aware of the words we use.

<sup>2</sup> Protective Capacity refers to caregiver characteristics that are directly related to child safety. See infographic that further describes protective capacities here:  
<https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/107035.pdf?r=1&rpp=25&upp=0&w=NATIVE%28%27SIMPLE+SRCH+ph+is+%27%27protective+factors%27%27%27%29&m=1&order=native%28%27year%27%27Descend%27%29>

change. The Children’s Bureau (CB) believes, that for many child welfare systems across the country, it will take significant effort to undo years of practice that discouraged resource families from actively engaging in open relationships with the parents of children in their care. While some jurisdictions may have already begun adopting the best practices described in this IM, for others, this will be completely new territory. This IM seeks to support this practice by providing information on why this approach can be effective, and how child welfare agencies may begin to implement.

This IM is organized as follows:

Background

Information

- I. The Need for Approaching Foster Care as a Support for Families
- II. Best Practice Guidance for Utilizing Foster Care as a Support for Families
- III. Resources and Innovation in Utilizing Foster Care as a Support for Families
- IV. Conclusion

Resources

## **BACKGROUND**

CB is committed to two overarching goals: (1) strengthening families through primary prevention to reduce child maltreatment and the need for families to make contact with the formal child welfare system; and (2) dramatically improving the foster care experience for children, youth, and their parents when a child’s removal from the home and placement in foster care is necessary. To accomplish these goals, child welfare systems and the public at large will need to view families that make contact with the child welfare system differently, and adopt new approaches for supporting families.

Transforming the child welfare system in the United States from a reactionary system that waits for trauma to occur before offering support to families, into a system that is proactively designed to promote family well-being and healing, requires a change in mindset for elected officials, state and tribal child welfare leaders, staff, service providers, the legal and judicial community and other stakeholders. The CB recognizes that this will take a national culture shift among child welfare professionals and the public. In our experience, changes in policy alone are inadequate to meet the challenge; changes in values are essential. Likewise, changes within the child welfare agency alone will be insufficient to change the course of child welfare practice. Judges, attorneys for the child welfare agency or state/tribe, children’s attorneys, resource parents, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), service providers and others involved with our system are all integral to making and sustaining the shift. All involved with the child welfare system

must see parents involved with the child welfare system as human beings in need of help who are worthy of respect. There is a need to assess how poor and vulnerable families are often portrayed and perceived and to be mindful of how those portrayals or perceptions influence what types of resources are available, and to whom, and legislative, policy and practice decisions at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels of government. Budget allocations are often indicative of priorities for child welfare work.

Currently, the vast majority of the federal child welfare budget goes toward reimbursing state and tribal title IV-E agencies for some costs associated with foster care. Foster care exists to protect children from abuse or neglect occurring in their own homes. While the primary aim of foster care is to meet a child's immediate need for safety, we know that physical safety is only one part of child well-being. Children cannot have well-being without feeling safe, but they can certainly have safety without having their other well-being needs met. Too many children and youth in our foster care system have this experience. We also recognize that lack of permanency has a direct impact on their well-being. The field recognizes that when a child remains in foster care for an extended time, experiences multiple placements and does not have his or her key connections preserved, it significantly compromises his or her well-being. This can result in a lack of belonging and a lack of meaningful, long-term connections with adults. It is imperative that foster care placement holistically addresses the safety, well-being, and permanency needs of children. Failure to recognize that all three needs are connected to one another, and that attention to all three needs is a fundamental obligation, may prevent children from thriving.

While there will always remain a need for foster care<sup>3</sup>, CB believes that need can be reduced substantially through a national commitment to strengthening families and communities through community-based, readily accessible family supports and services. Where foster care is necessary, that same commitment can dramatically improve the experience and promote the well-being of children and parents. Foster care must be more than a placement or bed alone in order to meet the well-being needs of children and their parents, regardless of the child's permanency goal. Likewise, resource families have much more to offer than a safe place, and in our experience, are overwhelmingly deeply caring people who wish to help children heal and thrive. Relationships, belonging, and human connectedness are critical to well-being and must become key components of more humane and effective foster care practice. We can best promote well-being through foster care by ensuring that:

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<sup>3</sup> Note that in instances where aggravated circumstances exist it may not be appropriate for parental involvement to continue as described in this IM. There will always be a need for foster care as a means of protecting children that have been severely physically abused or sexually exploited. Statistically these situations make up a very small percentage of the population of children abused and neglected. This memorandum describes a new approach for foster care where there is an absence of aggravated circumstances or severe physical or sexual abuse and where such dangers do not exist.

- Agencies and courts thoroughly explore existing familial relationships and maternal and paternal relatives as possible placements (section 471(a)(29) of the Act);
- Agencies and courts place children with relatives or fictive kin, people who they know, when it is not possible to safely remain with their parent or primary caregiver (section 421 and 471(a)(19) of the Act);
- Agencies and courts make all reasonable efforts to keep siblings together unless such a joint placement would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings (section 471(a)(31) of the Act);
- Children remain in their communities;
- Children remain in their schools and connected to classmates and teachers (section 471(a)(30) and 475(1)(G) of the Act);
- Parents and children remain connected, speak with and see each other daily;
- Parents remain as involved in normal daily parenting activities as possible;
- Agencies and courts encourage and support relationships between resource families and parents;
- Resource families view working with parents as a central part of their role;
- Resource families are available to provide post reunification support;
- Agencies provide resource families with consistent and ongoing support to maintain their well-being; and
- All child welfare stakeholders view and support utilizing foster care as a support to entire families.

ACYF-CB-IM-20-02<sup>4</sup> provides a comprehensive overview of the impact of a child's removal from his/her home on child well-being and outlines the importance of family time as a means of safely expediting reunification and improving child outcomes. Utilizing foster care as a support to the family includes the practice of encouraging and facilitating family time, but goes beyond that to promote the restorative impact of the relationship between parents and resource families and the concept of shared or co-parenting<sup>5</sup>. The benefits that derive from leveraging this unique relationship and approaching foster care as an opportunity for mentoring and shared parenting have the potential to enhance well-being for the entire family.

Research regarding the impact of a child's removal on parents and what is needed to engage parents effectively in working toward reunification, highlights the critical need for addressing parental motivation and providing social support to parents.<sup>6</sup> Both of these needs can be overlooked in case plans and the approach to working with parents. Ensuring that families have

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/im2002>

<sup>5</sup> The term co-parenting includes a range of activities that a parent would ordinarily perform, assist with or attend in the life of a child, including, but not limited to: daily routines such as meal preparation and sharing meals, bathing and hygiene related activities for young children, homework, extracurricular activities, medical appointments, holidays and special occasions, religious observances, and more generally availability to provide emotional support to promote child well-being.

<sup>6</sup> Kemp, S. P., Marcenko, M. O., Hoagwood, K., & Vesneski, W. (2009). Engaging parents in child welfare services: Bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare Journal* 88(1), 101-126.

the opportunity to enhance their protective capacity is another critical, but often missing, component in the array of services and supports typically offered to families, as evidenced in three rounds of Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) findings<sup>7</sup> and CB discussions with parents and youth. Utilizing foster care as a support for the entire family can address all of these key needs.

While the field has begun to acknowledge the trauma children experience from being removed, less attention has been given to the experience of parents when their children are removed from their care. Many parents involved in child welfare services want to provide a nurturing, safe home for their children, but struggle to do that for various reasons. These parents are also bonded and attached to their children, an experience inherent in families. In light of this, it is clear that parents experience significant loss when a child is removed, and the loss is often compounded with feelings of shame, anger and hopelessness. This painful reality has been confirmed in numerous discussions CB has had with parents. In addition to grieving the loss of their children, parents are often subjected to social and legal stigmatization when their children are removed.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to recognize that many parents involved in child welfare systems have endured past trauma related to abuse or neglect in childhood, their own experience in foster care, or other significant losses or harmful experiences.<sup>9</sup> Similar to children, parents involved in the system often deal with complex trauma, but approaches to working with parents are not always trauma-informed, potentially contributing to poor outcomes for family well-being and timely permanency as seen in CFSR findings across all three rounds.

Using a child's foster care placement as a support for the entire family can be a powerful tool to improve parent engagement, enhance parental capacity to meet the needs of their children, and achieve safe, timely reunification. Results from round three of the CFSR<sup>10</sup> indicate that states continue to struggle to effectively achieve these key outcomes for families and children in the foster care system:

- Agencies made concerted efforts to achieve reunification in 49% of foster care cases. (Permanency Outcome 1, Item 6 - Reunification)
- Agencies made concerted efforts to promote, support, and otherwise maintain a positive and nurturing relationship between the child in foster care and his or her parents in 58% of foster care cases. (Permanency Outcome 2, Item 11)

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/monitoring/child-family-services-reviews>

<sup>8</sup> Broadhurst, K. & Mason, C. (2017). Birth Parents and the Collateral Consequences of Court-ordered Child Removal: Towards a Comprehensive Framework. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 31, 41-59. doi: 10.1093/lawfam/ebw013

<sup>9</sup> National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Welfare Committee. (2011). Birth parents with trauma histories and the child welfare system: A guide for resource parents. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/birth\\_parents\\_with\\_trauma\\_histories\\_child\\_welfare\\_resource\\_parents.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/birth_parents_with_trauma_histories_child_welfare_resource_parents.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Forthcoming Children's Bureau CFSR R3 Aggregate Report

- Agencies conducted a comprehensive assessment of parents' needs and provided appropriate services to address needs of parents in 42% of foster care cases. (Well-Being Outcome 1, Item 12B)
- Children and parents were adequately engaged in case planning in 55% of foster care cases. (Well-Being Outcome 1, Item 13)
- Agencies conducted frequent, quality caseworker visits with parents in 41% of foster care cases. (Well-Being Outcome 1, Item 15)

These round three CFSR findings highlight a clear need to improve our efforts to engage with and support parents, and call for a different approach to working with children and families. That includes a shift in priorities and commitment to emphasizing family support and viewing foster care placement as a means for that support. By utilizing foster care as a way to ensure child safety while also supporting the entire family in achieving reunification, we can make the most of a difficult, yet sometimes necessary, experience for families and mitigate the trauma to children and parents that is associated with foster care.

## **INFORMATION**

### **I. The Need for Approaching Foster Care as a Support for Families**

Outside of situations of egregious abuse and neglect to children by their parents or a finding of aggravated circumstances, the goal for a child placed in foster care, is most often reunification. Federal law requires title IV-B/IV-E agencies to provide reasonable efforts to make it possible for children to reunify with their parents safely.<sup>11</sup> While “reasonable efforts” have not been defined in federal law, the CFSR examines efforts that agencies are making to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. The CFSR evaluates states on their ability to demonstrate these efforts through case reviews. Some of the efforts outlined in the CFSR and guidance provided to states that highlights areas of the CFSR that relate to utilizing foster care as a support to families, support timely reunification, and child and family well-being include:

Safety-Informed Decision-Making (CFSR Items 2, 3, 6, 14 and 15)

- Regularly assessing the safety of the home and family to which the child is to return
- Utilizing appropriate safety plans and safety-related services to allow reunification to occur timely
- Conducting frequent, quality visits with parents and children to gather information to

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<sup>11</sup> Sections 471(a)(15) and 472(a)(2)(A)(ii) of the Act; 45 CFR 1356.21(b)

inform quality risk and safety assessments

#### Preserving Connections and Supporting the Parent-Child Relationship (CFSR Items 8 and 11)

- Ensuring frequent, quality parent-child visitation
- Encouraging a parent's participation in school-related activities, doctor's appointments for the child, or engagement in after-school activities
- Providing or arranging transportation so that parents can participate in activities with the child
- Providing opportunities for therapeutic situations to strengthen the parent-child relationship
- Encouraging resource families to serve as mentors/role models for parents

#### Enhancing Parental Capacity through Assessment of Needs and Provision of Services (CFSR Item 12B)

- Ensuring a comprehensive assessment of the parent's needs, including consideration of the following:
  - What does the parent need to provide care and supervision and to ensure the well-being of his or her child?
  - What would the parent need to support his or her relationship with the child, or build a relationship if one was not established before the child's entry into foster care?
  - What underlying needs, if they continue to be unmet, will affect the individual's capacity to parent and nurture his or her child?
  - What is the parent's current capacity to engage in services and what supports may be needed to support engagement?
  - What will the parents need to provide care for all of their children after reunification?
- Ensuring appropriate services are provided in a timely manner to parents to meet all identified needs
- Engaging family members in services and monitoring the impact of service participation to ensure that treatment goals are being achieved and progress is made; and, if necessary, adjusting the provided services relative to case goals and progress

#### Enhancing Parental Capacity through Engagement in Case Planning (CFSR Items 13, 14 and 15)

- Discussing family strengths and needs with children and parents
- Ensuring that case planning meetings are arranged based on the family's availability and are utilized to engage the family in case planning discussions
- Ensuring caseworker visits with the parents are frequent enough to monitor their progress in services, promote timely achievement of case goals, and effectively address their children's safety, permanency, and well-being needs

- Ensuring caseworker visits are of good quality, with discussions focusing on the parent's and children's strengths, needs, services, and case plan goals
- The length and location of caseworker visits should be conducive to open, honest, and thorough conversations

We must all work diligently to apply these efforts and best practice standards for all families. A supportive approach to working with families is also consistent with the CB's prevention priority, as it serves to build protective capacity in parents to prevent further maltreatment. State data reviewed during CFSR case reviews indicate that too many families have multiple encounters with the child welfare system, repeat reports of child abuse and neglect, and re-entries into foster care, even after months and years of intervention by child welfare agencies. This further demonstrates that our typical approach to foster care and working with families has not been oriented toward strengthening families, has struggled with securing timely and permanent reunification, and is in need of significant improvement.

Ideally, families should be better off after receiving reunification services, however, there is evidence to suggest that child welfare interventions require improvements to meet familial needs. CFSR findings from rounds one to three have consistently identified challenges with service arrays across the country. Stakeholder interviews and information provided to CB from groups of parents and young adults with lived child welfare experience point to a need for greater availability of high quality services and supports. One way to help address such challenges is to use foster care as a more intentional support to families.

## **II. Best Practice Guidance for Utilizing Foster Care as a Support to Families**

When a child enters foster care, the reality for his/her parents is that another person has been assigned the role of parent for their child. The parent may feel that he or she is being replaced in the life of the child. This is a major disruption in the family and can be overwhelming, traumatic and incredibly fear-inducing for a parent. Over the past three years, CB leadership has met directly with hundreds of parents with lived child welfare experience. In those meetings, parents routinely expressed feelings of fear, anxiety and lack of trust of child welfare social workers and resource families. Parents identified these feelings as often presenting a sizeable obstacle for their engagement with the child welfare agency and fueling negative feelings toward, or mistrust of, resource families.

Intentionally working to create reunification-focused relationships between parents and resource families helps to dispel the fears that are often present for parents. When parents do not know who their child's new caregiver is, are uncertain if their child's needs are being met and do not have the opportunity to continue any of their parenting tasks, there is an inevitable power differential that can become a significant barrier for parents to face as they work toward reunification. This barrier may influence whether parents will effectively engage in case



planning and needed services and can significantly impact the trajectory for reunification. We must realize that these are normal human reactions for parents experiencing grief and uncertainty and take all measures possible to reduce this stress.

### *Implementing Best Practices*

The following best practices facilitate the use of foster care as a support to families:

1. Create a culture of viewing and utilizing foster care as a support for entire families, including:
  - Assemble and work with a team of stakeholders to create a new or enhanced vision for foster care in your jurisdiction. Involve parents and youth with lived experience, current and prospective resource families, caseworkers, attorneys for parents and children, judicial representatives and others in creating the vision.
  - Ground the vision in the experience stakeholders would like children and parents to have when they are unable to live together.
  - Identify and agree on key values.
  - Identify specific supports and opportunities that must be in place to make foster care a support to families.
  - Identify what may stand in the way of making those supports and opportunities available.
  - Develop protocols and guidelines to promote the shared values across stakeholder groups (including the legal and judicial community) and make those experiences possible.
  - Create training opportunities for all stakeholders (including judges and attorneys) on how to operationalize the vision.
  - Revamp all policy and procedures to reflect the vision and articulate how implementation will occur for new families coming in as well as families already being served by the agency.
  - Develop an ongoing feedback loop to hear directly from parents and youth in foster care about their experiences in foster care as a means of continuous quality improvement.
2. Ensure exhaustive family search efforts<sup>12</sup> occur at the onset of child welfare involvement so that children can be placed with relatives or kin, including:
  - Incorporate questions about known relatives/kin during the intake process to begin identifying potential resources at case opening.
  - Ensure that the investigation process include an assessment of all known relatives/kin (parents, children and youth should also be involved in identifying kin/relatives).
  - Develop training and protocols for workers and supervisors to ensure prioritization of relative/kin placement.
  - Implement evaluative processes for family/kin search efforts as part of continuous quality improvement.

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<sup>12</sup> See section 471(a)(29) of the Act

3. Recruit and train resource families that are committed to serving as a support to families with children in foster care, including:
  - Update marketing and recruitment materials and resources to communicate the clear expectation that the role requires resource families to work closely with the parents of children in foster care and their families.
  - Clearly articulate the need and purpose for resource families to serve as temporary caregivers and supports to facilitate reunification as opposed to a fast track for adoption.
  - Make clear that adoption may be an option, but only after resource families' work intensively to help families reunify when that is the goal.
  - Evaluate and enhance resource family training to ensure alignment with the agency's vision of foster care as a support to families.
  - Incorporate parents, youth and resource parents as trainers in resource family training.
  - Develop training components that address the unique needs of relatives/kin.
  - Ensure that resource family training includes an overview of the concerted efforts agencies are expected to make with families to ensure safety, permanency and well-being outcomes are achieved. It is critical that resource families understand the role they can play in advocating for best practices on behalf of children and families.
  - Make resource family training accessible to children's attorneys, Guardians ad Litem (GAL) and CASA volunteers to support a shared understanding of the agency's vision and expectation of resource families.
  - Create training opportunities for all stakeholders on the purpose of foster care in your jurisdiction, why it is beneficial to all involved, what the agency requires and how the agency and other stakeholders will provide support and reinforcement.
4. Support relationships between parents and resource families, including:
  - Create opportunities for parents and resource families to meet at the time of initial placement, or soon after placement. Agencies should plan these meetings based on the families' circumstances, ensuring safety and facilitating a non-threatening environment for both sets of parents. Early engagement at the time of placement is critical for both resource families and parents and is an essential step toward mitigating the trauma of removal.<sup>13</sup>
  - Prepare/train parents and resource families in developing a co-parenting relationship. This can be initiated at an initial case planning team meeting where they explore and define roles, expectations and shared parenting activities specifically for the child. Case

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<sup>13</sup> 'Bridging the Gap' is a model some states have used to formalize the process of building and maintaining relationships and communication between the parents and foster families involved in a youth's life, or between the foster and adoptive families, with the goal of supporting family reunification or another permanency plan. The model includes specific training components that are provided to resource families. It has been implemented in a number of states and in some jurisdictions, implementation includes the use of Ice Breaker Meetings, a stand-alone meeting developed by Family to Family, a child welfare reform initiative developed and supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. A toolkit for implementing Ice Breaker meetings can be found at <https://www.aecf.org/resources/icebreaker-meetings/>

managers can continue to provide ongoing training and support during their visits with parents and resource families. Frequent, joint visits with both sets of parents are recommended, particularly at the beginning of the placement, and occurring before or after family time/parent-child visitation. By setting the expectation early on that the agency's goal is to support the parent, even through the use of foster care placement, we communicate a key message to families that safe and timely reunification is the primary aim of the entire team.

- Communicate an expectation for ongoing efforts toward developing a co-parenting relationship and talk openly about the fears and struggles both sets of parents may be feeling/experiencing.
  - Encourage and support regular communication between resource families and parents.
  - Be clear about roles, expectations, safety boundaries, communication lines, and confidentiality. Engage resource families and parents in writing these expectations out together in language that everyone agrees on, as part of the case planning process.
  - Train attorneys for parents, children and the child welfare agency to identify and advocate for enhanced opportunities for support and co-parenting.
  - Ensure that judges are aware of these roles and expectations and actively inquire about progress in hearing and reviews.
5. Develop written family time and shared parenting agreements as part of the reunification plan, including:
- Identify key parenting tasks that resource families and parents can safely share during placement (homework and school activities, extra-curricular activities, medical/therapy appointments, etc.).
  - Work toward ensuring multiple, weekly opportunities for co-parenting activities to occur, in addition to family time.
  - Be creative in utilizing other relatives, friends, and supports in the plan.
  - Ensure parents have transportation to allow for full participation in agreed-upon parenting activities and family time.
  - Be prepared to support parents in developing skills for various parenting activities. Resource families can model parenting techniques or reference their particular methods/styles of parenting as a way to mentor.
6. Utilize resource families as post reunification supports, including:
- Encourage and support ongoing contact between resource families and parents after reunification occurs.
  - Offer concrete examples and support for how resource families can support families following reunification. In many ways, this can look like a role reversal, with the resource families visiting the family, with their permission, to assist with parenting and household management tasks, such as preparing or sharing meals, helping complete errands and or simply making social visits to help prevent isolation.
  - Build expectations for ongoing post reunification engagement, at the parents' option, into recruitment and training efforts.

7. Prioritize retention of resource families, including:

- Create and maintain in-person and virtual support groups for resource families to share experiences with one another and participate in peer-to-peer learning.
- Create and maintain a shared virtual workspace for resource families where they can share ideas and resources.
- Ensure that resource families have adequate, ongoing supports that can provide child care, respite care and meals. Encourage extended family and kin to serve as a “wraparound team” that can provide these supports for resource families.
- Facilitate and host opportunities for resource families and families of children in foster care to get together for social events.
- Be proactive and attentive in reaching out to resource families to ask about support that may be helpful, address any challenges, and ensure the well-being of the entire resource family.

8. Celebrate successes to support ongoing engagement, including:

- Emphasize parents’ positive efforts to address risk/safety concerns, preserve and strengthen their relationship with their child, and work with the planning team. Celebrate these successes together with resource families and children.
- Positively reinforce efforts by resource families to support parents. Judges can be especially helpful during hearings and reviews in highlighting and encouraging more good work.

***Practice Implications for Placement with Kin***

When children are placed with kin, a parent’s existing relationship with the caregiver can be a tremendous asset. Research demonstrates that placement with kin supports a number of improved outcomes for children and we must continue to prioritize that.<sup>14</sup> However, even when children are with kin, we do not always leverage the relationship between parents and caregivers as best we can, which may impede the timeliness and frequency of safe, successful reunification. CB has heard kin caregivers often express that they feel forgotten about after receiving children since the agency assumes they will simply take on the care of the children without any additional support. The error in this approach is again assuming that the only purpose for foster care placement is to ensure child safety.

Expectations for shared parenting should be explicit even when parents have an existing relationship with the resource family, such as with kinship placement. Additional support and training may be required for kin resource families to help them understand how to navigate the

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<sup>14</sup> Marc Winokur, Amy Holtan, and Deborah Valentine, “Kinship Care for the Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being of Children Removed From the Home for Maltreatment,” Campbell Systematic Reviews 1 (2009), doi:10.4073/ csr.2009.1.

new complexities of their relationship with parents due to foster care placement. Title IV-B/IV-E agencies should also take extra care to ensure that parents stay engaged and motivated to work toward reunification. Kinship placements can provide an opportunity for more parent child involvement, but depending on family dynamics, may also present challenges. Title IV-B/IV-E agencies should be mindful in helping families think through how family time will be planned and occur in kinship placements in advance of making placements to help ensure success.

### ***Assisting Resource Families:***

Recognizing the critical role that resource families play in supporting parents, we offer the following considerations to assist them in adapting to, and becoming champions for, this change:

- Utilize story-telling. One of the most powerful ways to shift values and beliefs is through storytelling. Find resource families and parents (in your own state/tribe or in others) who experienced the benefits of co-parenting and believe in this vision and have them share the positive impact it has made in the lives of their children.
- Facilitate open dialogue. Don't expect families to adapt immediately to this change but, rather, create the space for open communication where resource families can ask questions, seek help, share concerns/fears, and learn from others.
- Progress step by step. Support resource families in taking incremental steps toward developing relationships with parents. Perhaps begin with a letter or email, progress to a phone call, and then support face to face meetings.
- Maintain the vision. While we are hopeful that all resource families will see the benefits of this approach to foster care and support the new vision, we must be prepared that some may not. In those situations, agencies must be willing to make hard decisions in order to support parent's reunification efforts. Facilitating moves to kin or relatives in these scenarios may best ensure timely permanency and support well-being for the entire family.

When agencies encourage resource families and parents to develop a relationship that focuses on co-parenting the child in care, they can achieve many benefits, including:

- We can mitigate the trauma of separation for the child and parent as the parent knows who is caring for the child and understands that the resource family is an ally who will keep the child safe while supporting the parents' efforts toward reunification.
- Parents do not have to fear that they are being "replaced" by the resource family and this creates less confusion and worry for the child as well, as they see the resource family as a friend and support to the parent.
- Children are able to see and experience the adults they care about working together, rather than against, each other. This may ease tension, anxiety and help stabilize an abnormal and traumatic experience.

- As parents and resource families share a common interest in the well-being of the child, an appropriate and supportive partnership can develop (respecting boundaries to ensure safety) which can serve as a key source of encouragement and support to the child's parent, ideally continuing post-reunification.
- Co-parenting activities ensure that parents stay meaningfully engaged in the child's life on a frequent basis.
- We can enhance visitation and family time opportunities as parents work together to coordinate schedules, keeping this a key priority during placement. This further reinforces to the parent that the placement is a time-limited support toward reunification.
- Resource families can serve as models of effective and safe parenting while also learning key information from the parent about the child's preferences, routines, and needs. This transfer of parenting knowledge and skills can occur in a more natural setting as the relationship builds and parents spend time together co-parenting the child.
- With increased exposure to parents in different settings, resource families are able to see more accurately the parent's strengths and needs which can help facilitate honest communication between all parties in case planning, and contribute to ongoing assessment by the social worker.
- We can more naturally and effectively facilitate a teaming approach with the worker, parent, resource family and other service providers working toward reunification.

### **III. Resources and Innovation to Support the Use of Foster Care as a Support to Families**

A number of jurisdictions across the country have implemented programs or approaches that promote foster care as a support to families. These programs and approaches serve as concrete examples of how to improve the foster care experience for children and their parents by creating opportunities for parents and resource families to work together and demonstrate to children that multiple adults love them, while enhancing parental protective factors and strengthening parent-child bonds. A wide variety of child welfare and community stakeholders, including judges and attorneys for parents, children and the child welfare agency can help promote and sustain such practices. The examples to follow include public, private and faith-based efforts to promote foster care as a support to families.

#### **Children's Home Society and Guilford County, North Carolina Department of Social Services**

Children's Home Society (CHS) and Guilford County, North Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS) are in the early phases of piloting a new approach to foster care designed to emphasize foster care as a vehicle for reunification. The pilot arose from a common goal among the agency and stakeholders to improve the reunification rate in the county. A team including CHS staff, DSS staff, GAL staff, youth, parents, and resource families designed and is overseeing the work. That team co-designed the three components of the pilot; (1) training materials for social workers and resource families to address resistance to shared parenting, (2) shared parenting practices at initial placement in foster care, and (3) materials to support the implementation of these practices. The team is working to develop formal training material for social workers and resource families, based on shared parenting practices and supporting materials. The team is also producing a series of videos as an additional training element that highlight the reason why reunification and shared parenting are important and the positive impacts for children, parents, and resource families.

The pilot currently focuses on three primary practices: shared parenting training during pre-service licensing, parent flyers (parents and resource families), and parent calls. Except for the shared parenting training, these practices all occur immediately following placement with the resource families. The underlying intent of these practices is to initiate relationships, break down barriers to communication, build partnerships between the resource families and parents, and provide parents with dignity while their children are in care.

Parent Flyers are brief, informal, written resources that provide basic information about the resource families to the parents. For parents, the effort is a way to give them a sense of the people who are caring for their child. This simple tool helps to set the tone for future interactions with parents. Parent Flyers allow parents a glimpse into the house and family their children will be with while they are away from them, which is comforting during a difficult time. Parent Flyers also allow parents to see that their child is with loving people, in a safe, stable home environment. Parent Flyers help parents understand resource families are open to forming a connection with them, which demonstrates the willingness to share parts of their life with them.

Parents receive the flyer at the first Child and Family Team meeting or 7-day hearing. The Parent Flyer has a section where the parent can provide information back to the resource families about them, their children, and their family. The Parent Flyer includes language that affirms the parent as an expert about their child and a partner with the resource family in supporting reunification. The design team also created protocols for introducing this tool and guide to resource families and parents as well as CHS, DSS, and GAL staff.

The Parent Call is a phone call that takes place between the resource family and parent at the 7-day visit in the resource family home. The DSS and CHS staff are present to help facilitate the phone call. The purpose of these calls is to establish communication between resource families and parents and begin building relationships that will ultimately lead to a partnership focused on

the needs of the child. These calls can also help to reduce parent's anxiety about their child's well-being and for the resource family to show their respect for them as the parent. The resource family can also clarify their intentions and their willingness to support the parent and reunification. Lastly, they can discuss information regarding the child (likes, dislikes, etc.) and begin to establish shared parenting roles (visits, phone calls, etc.).

The design team is soliciting feedback from all involved with these efforts on an ongoing basis to identify ways to improve the approach.

### **FaithBridge, Atlanta, Georgia**

FaithBridge is a faith-based organization operating in the metro Atlanta area and surrounding suburbs. The organization offers a number of family support services, including foster care placement. FaithBridge believes that restoring families and working towards reunification is just as important as licensing new resource families and caring for children in foster care.

Recognizing that outcomes for children are better when they can be reunited safely with their family of origin, FaithBridge intentionally included the parents in the center of their model. Their program's expectation is that their resource families participate not only in the redemption of the trauma children in foster care have experienced, but also in the restoration of their families as they seek to break generational cycles of difficulty and struggle. The agency's data indicate that reunification rates improved significantly when resource families worked closely with families and nearly 25% of families maintained a relationship post-reunification. FaithBridge's practice framework is composed of the following two principles:

1. It is in the best interest of the child for their resource families to engage in partnership parenting with their parents.
  - It is an expectation that families are willing to work alongside parents in order to be licensed with FaithBridge.
  - FaithBridge teaches resource families to understand the natural love the child has for the parent despite the circumstances associated with the child's removal.
  - FaithBridge asks resource families to recognize and respect the parent's role in the lives of the children.
2. Families (of origin and resource) thrive when they have a community of support.
  - FaithBridge works to assign every family to a Community of Care support network led by church partners. The Community of Care provides wrap-around support to resource families, parents, and children in foster care.
  - Since neuroscience research indicates that the trauma children and parents experience can be healed through the process of building healthy relationships, FaithBridge trains



families that no one should parent alone, and encourages all of their parents and resource families to build healthy support systems. With regular ongoing support, parents are more successful and resource families have higher retention rates and placement stability.

- FaithBridge utilizes former and current resource family trainers trained in Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) and Empowered to Connect parent coaching.

## **Ottawa County, Michigan**

In Ottawa County, Michigan, an effort has been underway for several years among the county child welfare agency and resource families to support the practice of resource families working closely with the parents of children and youth in their care. The approach is one that is rooted in a philosophy of mutual respect that recognizes that even when it may not be possible or appropriate for a child to live with his/her parents, they remain critically important in the lives of that child and that opportunities to keep the parents meaningfully involved in parenting activities is beneficial. The approach is designed to recognize that resource families can be helpful in reducing both child and parent trauma and enhancing parental protective capacities. Ottawa County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has made concerted efforts to recruit, encourage and support resource families that have an overall positive attitude about working with the parents of children placed in their homes. The approach emphasizes the importance of resource families and parents working together as a team.

Multiple efforts to support resource families in Ottawa County help reinforce the approach. The first begins with the staff of Ottawa County DHHS. The staff members always talk about parents in a respectful and strength-based way. They encourage resource families to have relationships with parents, and give ideas of ways to make this happen. They also allowed two resource families who have had positive relationships with parents to train other resource families on how to do this.

One resource family started an online Facebook support group for resource families called Ottawa Fosters. The Facebook support group has become a robust online community for resource families in Ottawa County to connect, share advice and discuss experiences. There are rules around confidentiality, but most importantly, the goal is to keep conversations positive and supportive of everyone involved in the child's case, including their parents. It has also organized support for families in need of items following reunification.

A second effort, initially started by two resource families has also grown into a powerful support for resource families. This approach developed organically through discussions between resource families that came to know one another because the children placed with them attended the same school. The founders simply thought it would be a good idea to create an informal way for resource families to get together, talk about how things were going in their homes and share experiences. What started as a morning a month with a small group in resource family homes

has now grown to a larger gathering of resource families and children that occurs at the local school.

A third effort which has been in existence for many years, Mosaic, a community-based provider in the county, also encourages relationships between resource families and parents and provides support to resource families. The leader of this group has been providing foster care for many years, and often shares her experiences in the mentor role to the parents of the children in her care to help support the approach.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

All title IV-B/IV-E agencies have an opportunity to change the foster care experience drastically for children and parents from one that compounds trauma and prolongs permanency to one that supports healing, promotes timely reunification and strengthens families. To begin the process, stakeholders must agree that family is important in the lives of children in foster care and meaningful relationships with parents and siblings are a key to child well-being, and act accordingly. We strongly encourage all title IV-B/IV-E agencies to commit to using foster care as a support to families by implementing the best practices outlined in this IM. To implement this approach successfully, agency and court leaders must mobilize service providers, attorneys and resource families in every community to promote this vision and provide the critical supports that families need to achieve successful reunification.

**Inquiries:** [CB Regional Program Managers](#)

/s/

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Elizabeth Darling  
Commissioner  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families

Disclaimer: IMs provide information or recommendations to States, Tribes, grantees, and others on a variety of child welfare issues. IMs do not establish requirements or supersede existing laws or official guidance.

## Resources

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