



PERMANENCY

ENGAGING AND PARTNERING WITH BIRTH PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



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WHY IT MATTERS

In 2016, 125,975 children and youth were reunified with their parent(s) or primary caretaker(s). This represents 51% of all children exiting foster care.¹ Birth parent participation in child welfare programs has been demonstrated to reduce the recurrence of maltreatment and contribute to the reunification of families, and improve emotional adjustment in children. One study found that increasing child welfare program attendance of birth parents from low to average levels resulted in the reduction of recurrence of child maltreatment by 35%.² Keeping parents involved also helps them complete programs such as domestic violence education, substance abuse treatment, and parenting classes, that are required for successful reunification.³

There is a growing number of programs that actively engage birth parents in the child welfare system

through early outreach to parents; practical assistance; building supportive relationships with peers, foster parents, and child welfare workers; consulting parents in the decision-making process around service provisions; and family-centered practices.⁴ Engaging

parents begins by removing barriers to participation and improving the quality of relationships among all parties involved with the case. In

addition to possible mistrust between parents and child welfare professionals and others on the team, there are practical barriers that may exist to birth parents' participation such as transportation, child care, or competing demands (e.g., employment, required treatment appointments).

Facilitating positive connections between foster parents and birth parents will support the engagement and

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participation levels of birth parents as well as increase family connectedness, reduce childhood trauma, expedite permanency and increase the likelihood of reunification.⁵ Connecting foster parents and birth parents in partnership requires the establishment of clear boundaries between birth and foster families as well as the use of supports to the building of the relationship. When these connections are healthy and strong, and continue after reunification, children will benefit from having these additional supportive relationships continue in their lives.

that parent partners increase birth parent engagement, decrease distrust in the child welfare system and increase family support structures. They also help alleviate stressors between parents and child welfare agencies that may help improve child outcomes.⁹

Another way that birth parents are engaged is as advisors that help inform agency policy and decision making about program planning. These birth parent advisors are usually parents who have had their dependency court case closed for a significant amount

When birth parents and foster parents realize what the main goal is, we work better together. It puts the child at the center. Children thrive in a community of strong families.

— Birth father

Engaging fathers in the child welfare system is critical as their involvement is linked to positive educational and developmental outcomes.⁶ Unfortunately, the barriers that exist for mothers to actively participate in the child welfare system are often exacerbated for fathers. Research shows that providing fathers with services that address employment may significantly increase their involvement with other child welfare programs.⁷ Sometimes engaging fathers begins with finding them and understanding their paternity and legal issues. Using family find strategies to identify not only fathers, but relatives of fathers can be helpful in engaging them in their child's life.⁸

Birth parent partners are parents that have been involved in the child welfare system themselves and now provide guidance and support to parents currently involved in the child welfare system. They serve as advocates, leaders and/or mentors. Evidence suggests

of time and all issues related to their earlier court case have been resolved. They are most successful when the birth parent advisor is treated as an equal member of the "team" and compensated for their time. However, it is important to recognize that parents may need to debrief when advisory topics trigger emotional reactions.

Each family is unique and some families may be challenged in their participation due to their marginalized or vulnerable status such as immigrant families or families of color. This requires caseworkers and other team members including CASAs to become culturally competent; that interpreters are available when needed and that professionals work hard to reduce institutional mistrust by creating a supportive atmosphere and removing logistical barriers for parents' participation.

ADVOCATES IN ACTION

ACTIONS

- **Learn about the programs that exist for birth parent engagement.** If there are no formal programs, discuss with your program and supervisor ways that birth parents can be better engaged in child welfare programs.
- **Identify barriers that may exist for birth parents to be more fully engaged.** If parents you are working with are not as engaged as they could be, figure out what the barriers are to their participation and find ways to reduce or eliminate those barriers. If it is an issue of mistrust between birth parent and caseworker, what can you do to help bridge this gap? Modeling for both parties your respect to each of their roles may go a long way in helping set a different tone. For practical barriers, what can be done? Does the parent need bus tokens or can meetings take place closer to the parents' home or in their home?
- **If there is a "parent partner" program available in your jurisdictions, reach out and get to know the parents and the activities they provide.** Having a working relationship with this group will help you identify when birth parents would benefit from having a birth parent mentor or partner. Particularly at the beginning of a case, parents often feel very vulnerable and overwhelmed. Having someone who has "been there" can be reassuring and calming.
- **Remember to include fathers.** If the father isn't a party to the case, find out why. There may be reasons that legally prevent the father from being involved in the case. However, if you find out that there is nothing preventing a father from being involved, collaborate with the child's case worker on ways to engage him.
- **Educate yourself and others on the variety of programs that currently exist.** Once armed with this information, share with others about their effectiveness in helping families and children achieve better outcomes.



BRIGHT SPOT

BIRTH AND FOSTER PARENT PROGRAMS MULTIPLE LOCATIONS, UNITED STATES¹⁰

When her daughter was four, China Darrington lost her job, and then lost custody of her daughter. Already struggling with drug addiction, losing her daughter only intensified the issues. For Darrington, that was the beginning of a long road through treatment and eventual reunification with her daughter. What she learned along the way is something she now shares with an unlikely audience: foster parents. Working as a peer recovery coach, Darrington trains foster parents to help them understand unique challenges that birth parents face when their child is taken into the foster care system. She is part of a growing movement at the national level to bring birth parents and foster parents together.

In 2015, when three supporting organizations started talking about the important role that birth parents and foster parents play in the lives of vulnerable children, they wanted to figure out how to bring those two groups together. In most cases, the two work on opposite sides, even though they both care for and love the same child. They created the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership, and hosted the first convening in Seattle last summer, June 2017. The convening helped to identify more than a dozen practices and policies that can impact

how foster parents and birth parents interact in order to achieve the best outcomes for kids in care and to help prevent children from entering the system in the first place.

Since the convening, discussion continues around the suggestions to move forward the idea of foster parents and birth parents working on together. Several task forces are working on strategies and recommendations for foster parents and birth parents to work better together within the child welfare system.

Three short-term goals include the following:

- Increase involvement of birth parents and foster parents in advocacy for improved policies and practices that benefit families and children.
- Identify strategies to help birth parents and foster parents work together to facilitate reunification and prevent re-entry.
- Increase capacity of child welfare systems to recruit and retain foster parents willing and able to partner with birth parents.

For more information, contact training@casaforchildren.org

SELECTED RESOURCES

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF BIRTH PARENT ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

ENGAGING BIRTH PARENTS WITH CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Name	Description
<i>Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)</i> ¹¹	<p><i>Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)</i> encourages family engagement in the child welfare system through emphasizing family preferences when discussing and deciding upon case plans. FGDM can empower families to contribute to permanency planning and has been shown to contribute to expedited permanency.</p>
<i>Parents Anonymous</i> ¹²	<p>This program is designed as both a prevention and treatment program that strengthens families that are at risk of becoming (or already are) involved in the child welfare system, have behavioral health challenges, or face other family problems. Services include weekly support groups, in-home parent training, helpline services, and other supportive ongoing functions.</p>
<i>Parent-Child Interaction Therapy</i> ¹³	<p>PCIT teaches positive parenting through child-directed and parent-directed interactions. It has been utilized in several states across the country and has been shown to reduce the rate of recurrence of maltreatment when compared to standard services.</p>
<i>Signs of Safety</i> ¹⁴	<p><i>Signs of Safety</i> is a strategy in child welfare that uses a collaborative approach to work in partnership with families, emphasizing strength-based practices that encourage engagement and support the completion of case plan goals.</p>

ENGAGING BIRTH FATHERS

Name	Description
<u>Divine Alternatives for Dads Services (DADS)</u> ¹⁵	<p>DADS provides assistance to fathers in Washington State with reunification, parenting plans, child support, case management and crisis intervention. Staff and volunteers help fathers overcome barriers to parent visitation and employment, giving them a foundation to help build strong families and make positive changes in their lives.</p>

BIRTH PARENT PARTNERS PROGRAMS

Name	Description
<u>Parents in Partnership, Los Angeles</u> ¹⁶	<p>The <i>Parent Partners</i> are a group of parents who have successfully navigated the system and now work in partnership with DCFS to provide parents with information, empowerment, and hope. They provide support, information, and mentorship to parents who have recently lost custody of their children as well as parents whose children are in the foster care system without permanency. <i>Parent Partners</i> are trained in the areas of parents' rights and responsibilities, grief and loss, communication, cultural awareness, child abuse reporting, and family violence.</p>
<u>Washington State Mentoring Programs</u> ¹⁷	<p>Washington State has four parent engagement/mentoring models including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>Icebreaker</i> meeting, a facilitated meeting held shortly after a child is removed so birth and foster parents can meet each other and share information about the needs of the child; • The <i>Parent to Parent</i> program, designed to increase early engagement of birth parents newly entering the dependency process; • The <i>Parent Mentoring</i> program, in which skillful, experienced foster parent mentors and social workers partner to mentor parents; and • The <i>Parent Partners</i> program, in which previously mentored parents help other parents through informative sharing and other forms of assistance.

BIRTH PARENT ADVISORS

Name	Description
<p><u>Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)</u>¹⁸</p>	<p>The <i>Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)</i> is a parent / professional partnership dedicated to public child welfare reform in New York City through increased, meaningful parent involvement in service and policy planning. Since the project began, birth parent advisors have been extremely valuable in developing advocacy roles across agencies.</p>
<p><u>Strengthening Families</u>¹⁹</p>	<p><i>Strengthening Families</i> focuses on the promotion of five protective factors, which include: nurturing and attachment, knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development, parental resilience, social connections, and concrete supports for parents. The birth parent perspective has been identified by states using <i>Strengthening Families</i> as a compliment to the <i>Protective Factors Framework</i>, helping families engage in programs and services. Specifically, birth parent advisors help ensure that maltreatment prevention programs and strategies remain relevant and responsive to family needs, promote the best environment for children’s development, and encourage the engagement of additional parent partners. 30 states to date are participating.</p>

ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, www.acf.hhs.gov/cb
- 2 Maher, E.J., Marcynyszyn, L.A., Corwin, T.W. & Hodnett, R. (2011). Dosage matters: The relationship between participation in the Nurturing Parenting Program for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers and subsequent child maltreat. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 1426–1434.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Casey Family Programs, *Strategies to Increase Birth Parent Engagement, Partnership, and Leadership in the Child Welfare System: A Review* (July 2012).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Coakley, T.M. (2008). Examining African American Fathers' involvement in permanency planning: An effort to reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 407–417.
- 7 Bronte-Tinkew, J., & Horowitz, A. (2010). Factors associated with unmarried, nonresident fathers' perceptions of their co-parenting. *Journal of Family Issues*, 31, 31–65.
- 8 The Federal Parent Locator Service may be helpful in finding fathers. See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/federal-parent-locator-service-information-for-families>
- 9 Casey Family Programs (July 2012).
- 10 This section was adapted from: "Building Bridges between Birth Parents, Foster Parents" (January 2018), *Chronicle of Social Change*. Available at: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/featured/building-bridges-birth-parents-fostering-parents>
- 11 <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/decisions/>
- 12 <http://parentsanonymous.org/>
- 13 <http://www.pcit.org/>
- 14 <https://www.signsofsafety.net/signs-of-safety/>
- 15 <https://www.aboutdads.org/>
- 16 http://lacdcfs.org/PIP_Eng/Index_RE.html
- 17 <https://partnersforourchildren.org/resources/reports/parent-engagementmentoring-models-washington-state>
- 18 <http://bridgebuilderscpi.org/content/child-welfare-organizing-project-cwop>
- 19 <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/2011guide.pdf>