

Teaming with Birth Families

It may be difficult to initiate, develop and maintain a positive working relationship with birth parents while their child resides with you. But building this relationship can greatly enhance your bond with the child and make a positive difference for their family.

Why is it important to team with birth parents?

It may be challenging for you to engage with the birth family, as it is often difficult to get past the abuse and neglect the child may have endured. There is a strong social stigma throughout the nation that blurs the reality that countless birth parents need help — not punishment. To help maintain your neutrality, focus on your dislike of the act that occurred and not on the parents. In many cases, parents are not intentionally malicious towards their children; rather, they may have a mental illness or suffer from substance abuse and have not had access to appropriate treatment. Sometimes they were in care as a child themselves and did not have anyone to guide them or teach them about basic life skills, let alone parenting.

It is common to have mixed feelings regarding the birth family and your interactions with them. Nonetheless, it is important to remain neutral and avoid speaking negatively about the parents as this can cause damaging tension in your relationship, not only with them but also with the child.

As a kinship or resource parent, you will assist the child in your care with reaching permanency. One way to help the child is by maintaining their family

connections. Visits between parents and their children are one of the most important factors in successful reunification.

What are some tips for working with birth families?

A good way to develop a connection with the parents is by getting them to talk about their child. Ask them questions or mention the child's positive attributes. This interaction will establish common ground. You may have the answers already, but asking the parents acknowledges that they have a lot of insight into their child. Asking questions and sharing information with the biological family can strengthen your relationship with them.

Some examples of questions to ask:

- Does your child have any allergies?
- What are some of your child's favorite foods?
- What types of things does your child like to do for fun?

There is no one way to work with the parents of children in care. For some families, you may take on the role of a mentor. In other instances, family visits may be supervised by the child's Worker. Since each family is different, you may find that your interaction changes from situation to situation. The important thing is that, with the input you give the child's Worker, the best plan for the child can be created.

How can I help the parents talk openly during our first meeting?

You may want to consider telling them

something about your own family. Keep the information general such as, "I have two children: a boy and a girl." This may help you find common ground while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Allow them to ask you questions to calm their fears about where their child is living. Ask them for the dates of special family occasions like birthdays and holidays, then help the child send cards to mark these special days, allowing them to stay involved with their family.

How do I work with a family that is reluctant to engage?

Children go through the grief process after being separated from their families. Birth parents grieve as well. In the first stage of this process, they are in shock over the fact that their child has been separated from them. If you are meeting them at this stage, let them know that you are caring for their child until they can be returned home. Tell the parents that their child misses them and that you want them to know that you will take good care of them.

Another stage of the grief process is for the parents to protest why the state has taken their child away from them. Remember, they might think they did nothing wrong and do not understand why their child has been separated. They may want to fight against the system, and the only way they can release their grief may be to lash out at you, especially if they feel they have no one else. They may be rude or try to discredit you; do not take this personally. These are all signs of grief and fear and should be looked at with empathy. Let the parents know you will

not harm their child. Tell them you hope to work with them to come up with the best plan and that the knowledge they have about their child will be helpful in this process. Recognize their love for their children and focus on their strengths.

Who should I talk to if I am having problems with engaging with the family?

Talk to the child's Worker and let them know if you are having problems, or that you are making progress in building a relationship with the parent. If you have concerns, you can also call your **embrella** Family Advocate for additional support. As the child's parents adjust to the situation it may become easier to work with them, but if this is not the case, the child's Worker may have to assist you in this effort or provide suggestions that will help the situation.

What are ways to further support and connect with the family?

Working cooperatively with the child's birth family will help build a lasting relationship not only between you and the parents but also between the parents and their child. There are many ways to model positive parenting skills and teach responsibilities previously not known to the child's parents.

- Log regular updates and important milestones in a notebook and include pictures. When the child attends a family visit, they can take the book with them to share with their parents.
- Include the parents in any school conferences scheduled regarding the child
- When planning a birthday or other celebration involving the child, include their parents and other relatives who are important to them
- If the parents can't attend an event be sure to provide them with photos and let them know the details
- Whenever possible, include the parents when scheduling doctor appointments for the child
- Be a role model for the parents for appropriate parenting and family life

My Worker mentioned a Life Book for children in care. What is it, and how do I obtain one?

The Life Book is a way of documenting and illustrating important moments in a child's life, from small things like getting an A on a test to monumental moments like getting a driver's license. Life Books are also a tool to assist children in understanding trauma they have endured and how to build resilience to their trauma. The Life Book can contain pictures, memorabilia, and papers important to each child. Children can contribute those things they feel are important.

The Life Book is a good way to engage the child's parents. Ask for their input, show them what has already been placed in the book, and set aside time for them to assist you and the child with adding to their Life Book. **embrella** offers free Life Books to all children in care. To obtain a Life Book, simply reach out to **embrella** at 800.222.0047.

For more information, register for our kinship and resource parent course Teaming with Birth Families for Success. Visit www.embrella.org to learn more.