Supporting the Birth Parent and Caregiver Relationship: Recommendations for Programs and Policies

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Summary

Entry into the foster care system can be a traumatic experience for children which can have many lasting negative effects. Burgeoning state and city practices offer ideas about how we can improve the relationships between birth parents and caregivers to maintain connection and support children. Supporting the connection of birth parents and caregivers is a key area for improving systems. Establishing the Family Connection Program puts the needs of children in the center and supports families in Washington.

Background

Healthy attachments, typically first created with biological parents, are important to supporting a child's development.[14] In some child welfare cases, after an investigation of abuse or neglect, children are removed from home and placed in out-of-home care. This process can be traumatic, and disrupt important early attachment.[16] The disruption for children in foster care, combined with related trauma, can collide to create a high risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties and poor outcomes later in life.[16]

Given these risk factors and vulnerabilities when children are in foster care, it is important to seek protective factors and effective strategies to support them. One intervention that has a strong protective factor for children in foster care is higher frequency of contact with biological parents.[17] Children with weekly contact with biological parents, compared with children who see their parents less often showed lower levels of depression and externalizing problems.[17]

Collaboration between birth and foster parents also may be beneficial for children and support a child's healthy development.[20] A 2010 study demonstrated that effective co-parenting and conflict resolution between birth parents and foster parents reduced the amount of children's internalizing and externalizing problems.[13] Another study tested a dual strategy of providing parent training along with a collaborative co-parenting component.

The study had promising results, including significant gains in positive parenting, and collaborative co-parenting for both biological and foster parents.

It also had fewer externalized problems for children after the intervention. One three-year intervention demonstrated that focusing on the relationship between birth and foster parents helped to increase participation in visits, increase positive birth and foster parent connections, and build positive relationships with social workers.[20]

While maintaining connection is a known protective factor, the United States child welfare systems are often siloed which institutionally leads to breaking, instead of maintaining connection. Furthermore, the system historically has discouraged connection and collaboration between birth and foster parents in subtle and not so subtle ways, such as negative messages about birth parents who are struggling, and lack of training around building relationships for birth parents or caregivers.[15] Often both sets of parents mistrust one another, communication breaks down, and children, who may find themselves in the middle of these relationships, are at risk of further trauma.[22]

Current Programming in Washington State that Fosters Connection

In Washington state some interventions already exist that support birth parent/caregiver collaboration.

- **Family Team Decision Meetings** (FTDM): FTDMs are a type of shared planning meeting that invites family and other support systems to be involved in decision making at critical junctures in a family's involvement with child welfare system.[18]

- **Parents for Parents** (P4P): P4P provides support to birth parents who are newly involved in the child welfare system by pairing them with parents who have navigated the system successfully (parent allies).[19] Parent allies provide peer mentoring for families through court outreach, education, and ongoing peer support. The program began in 2009 in Pierce county and currently operates in 14 counties. P4P has promising outcomes including increasing visitation and improved likelihood of reunification.[23]

- **Parent involvement in foster training**: Several counties in Washington now include parent allies as facilitators in foster parent licensing training. Including parent allies humanizes birth parents and educates future foster parents about the benefits of positive relationships.[3]

Innovation Outside of Washington

Around the country, some innovative programs provide hopeful examples around how to encourage birth parent and caregiver collaboration, ultimately enhancing support for children. Innovation is documented in four different areas: training and education, communication, long-term collaboration, and system and legal realms.

Training and Education

- **Better Together with Birth Parents** is a two-day workshop training designed to help foster parents, birth parents, and staff build equal and mutually respectful partnerships among each other.[3] Trainings are held quarterly and have been integrated into provider programming. This curriculum was developed by Casey Family programs, and rolled out in New Hampshire 2010.

- **The Community Café** is workshop model used to engage foster parents, kinship care providers, birth parents and other key stakeholders in shorter-term or specific issue-focused strategies using a strengths-based approach. This model uses collaborative workshops, inviting all stakeholders to the same table to problem solve together. Community Cafés promote peer-to-peer learning between caregivers, and work towards building resilience and practical parenting strategies.[2]

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Communication

- **Comfort Calls,** are calls between birth parents, caregivers, and sometimes caseworkers that provide an opportunity for parents/caregivers to discuss the needs of the child(ren), and establish a foundation of partnership for the good of the child.[3,6] Calls take place as soon as possible, typically between 12 and 24 hours after removal. This model is a product of the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) and has been initiated in several states including California, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Nevada, and Illinois.

- A **Back and Forth Journal** is a tool used to initiate and maintain communication between birth parents and caregivers. The journal provides a means of hands-off communication between parties and allows them to ask questions and share information or stories.[3] Journals are used in the Strive program in Washington state, formally at an agency in Philadelphia, and informally in many areas.

Long-term Collaboration

- **Fostering Relationships** (formerly ABC-V) is a program that involves pre-visit training with caregivers and allows caregivers to provide positive feedback to the birth parents during visits. Communication may decrease feelings of rejection among birth parents, increase visitation, and hopefully also reunification.[3,11] Fostering Relationships is a Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) used in Minnesota, Nevada, and Florida.

- In a **Partnership Parenting** approach, caregivers invite the birth family to participate in their child's activities, appointments and events such as doctors' appointments, school conferences, and family dinners.

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The caregiver and birth parent collaborate and work together while the child is placed in out-of-home placement. Clear roles are established between the caregiver and birth parent. QPI developed guidelines for this approach and are currently implemented in Florida, Illinois, California, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.[3,]

- **Icebreaker Meetings** are child-focused, in-person meetings held between birth parents and caregivers to share important information about the child and begin building a relationship[3,9]. Meetings take place between three to five days after placement, and are recommended around anytime a child experiences a placement change (from home to a foster home, from foster home to adoptive home, from a group home to a relative, etc.). Connection is critical in reducing the trauma the child has experienced as a result of placement. This approach was developed by the Annie E. Casey foundation and is currently being used in some counties in California and Louisiana.

Systems and Legal Realms
- **Improving Outcomes for Children** (IOC) is a service delivery model where case management services for children in out-of-home placement are delivered by providers in the child's neighborhood, called Community Umbrella Agencies (CUAs). IOC also has a strong focus on *Family Teaming*, which ensures that the child, the family and other caring adults, including foster parents, are actively involved in planning and decision making. IOC increases kinship placements and reduces caseloads.[24] The Philadelphia Department of Human Services uses this approach and operates a Single Case Plan system at the community level.[3, 10]

Highlight: Family Connections Program
- In 2010, the Icebreaker model was introduced in Washington state, but yielded minimal results due to lack of support available to birth parents and caregivers, and limited social worker capacity[25]. The Family Connections Program (FCP) builds off the Icebreaker model, and incorporates a supportive peer-mentor model, called the Connections Team. Two central supports make up this team including a Parent Ally, and a Caregiver Mentor.

The Connections Team works with the parents and caregivers to prepare them for the initial meeting, facilitate the meetings, and offer continued support. These teams center the needs of children by supporting the new relationships, easing transitions, and helping navigate communication throughout their placement. With the support provided by the Connections Team, the caseworker can remain integrated in the process while maintaining their workload capacity. This program offers multi-faceted support to reduce trauma for children and increase family reunification.

Recommendations

Washington state could positively impact children and families whose lives are touched by child welfare systems by **establishing a statewide Family Connections Program.** Children would be well cared for, and all participants would be supported throughout the dependency process. Other likely outcomes from the program include increased caregiver retention, shorter dependency cases, more family reunification, and lower rates for children re-entering care.

At the state level, the Family Connections Program would also provide a mechanism to help advance a significant culture change within DCYF that places children at the center and acknowledges the importance of relationships with all caregivers.

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