

Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First

Imagine your favorite potted plant. Now picture someone taking that plant and cutting it off where the plant meets the soil and sticking the remaining stem into a new pot of dirt. The plant doesn't thrive and yet you gave it a great new pot with fresh soil, water, and organic fertilizer. Must be something wrong with that plant . . .

Or is it that we, as a system, have just cut the child off from the roots of his family and taken him out of his familiar soil? What if we can help him to retain his roots while we're temporarily replanting him until the first pot is able to mend a few holes? *(Thanks to the Institute of Human Services for the example.)*



Shared parenting is the newest term for what some foster families have been doing all along—welcoming a relationship with the family of the child in care. It happens successfully when foster parents and parents work together to raise children.

Toni, an experienced Wisconsin foster parent, says that, "Shared parenting involves opening your home to a child's family for visits, frequent communication, and making decisions together."

Shared parenting is a philosophy that governs the way foster families and families involved with the system work together. It emphasizes the key role foster parents play in keeping children connected to their families, while at the same time allowing the

children's parents to remain the experts—the parents— on their children. Foster parents are key in helping to give the natural parents credibility and confidence.

When kids in care see two families working together and giving the okay to have a relationship with both families, they experience less stress and don't have to worry as much about loyalty to either family. Shared parenting can result in kids having shorter placements and quicker returns home. Even in cases where kids can't return home, shared parenting often helps kids put the pieces of their life together more easily.

Initial Meeting

Upon initially meeting with a child's family, try to get information from the parents about the child. Parents need to be empowered. They are an excellent resource for gaining insights into the needs of the child in your care. You might also ask if there are others (family friend, mentor, favorite aunt, grandparent, etc.) who could or should be involved in the parenting or caretaking process.

- Discuss the specific needs of the child and how the needs can be met. How will the IEP plan be implemented? When does he or she get meds? Is there an important blanket or bedtime ritual that should be maintained?
- Outline specifics such as schedules, roles, and responsibilities. Who will make the doctor's

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appointments? Will the child's parents and foster parents be able to attend parent-teacher conferences? How will the child get to the visits?

- Anticipate disagreements and discuss ways that you can work together to resolve them.
- Discuss the family's expectations about contacts and visits within the foster home, birth home and community. Are weekly visits enough? Are they doable with everyone's schedule? Can the child call the family whenever he wants or just at certain times of the day?

Developing connections

The following are some suggestions in initially developing this relationship.

- Welcome the child's family into your home, and set boundaries with both the parents and child about any areas that are off limits to others (usually bedrooms). Or go with the child and the family if the child wants to give a tour of the whole house.
- Encourage regular contact between parents and children, as approved by the placing agency. Help make parents feel comfortable visiting in the foster home, or work with the family to find a neutral spot where everyone feels comfortable (school, a mall, library, restaurant, etc.).
- Reassure the parents that your job as a foster parent is to keep the child safe and provide temporary care. Remind them that you are not a replacement for the child's parents.
- Encourage regular contact between the adults about the child's health, behavior, school, friends, community, and job.
- Take photos of the child within the foster home along with photos during visits with family. Give your child's family copies of these photos.
- If possible, ask the parents to schedule

appointments for the child or try to accommodate the parents' schedule when setting up appointments.

- Encourage the birth parent to participate and have input into decisions about child care, school, medical, extra curricular activities, religious, and cultural events.

It might be easy to become overwhelmed or get discouraged about all the extra things that you should do—especially because you're already doing a lot just to care for the children placed in your home.

However, it might be helpful if you try to imagine that *you're* the one who has a child in care and just how grateful you'd be if someone were doing those extra things to keep you involved.

Recognizing parent strengths

Recognize the strengths of the parents, and praise them for their efforts and successes. Examples include the following:

- "You sure have good ideas about how to handle Juan's tantrums. I'm glad you have shared this with me."
- "I sure appreciate seeing you every week. It helps Juan see that we get along."
- Turning negative attributes into positive strengths can be trying. Sometimes a parent may question the foster parent's quality of care of their child. Turn this into a positive strength by saying, "It seems like you really care about Juan. For his sake, I want to make sure that we agree on what to do next."

You build trust if you respect the parent's strengths.

Be prepared for setbacks

There may be relapses by the parent, and they may not be interested or able to maintain the shared parenting

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relationship as they had in the past. Talk to your caseworker to keep them informed of the relationship with the birth parent and shared parenting process. You might also want to talk to other foster parents to see how they handled things when there were roadblocks between the families.

Strengthening the shared parenting relationship

Foster parents can promote a healthy relationship between child and parent(s) through not only their communication and attitude, but also through day-to-day actions, such as:

- Ask the birth parent to help with the child's life book. Ask for pictures and stories.
- Have children draw pictures, write stories, or poems for their parents.
- Invite the birth parent to join in the child's favorite activity with the foster family (family bike ride, playing a board game).
- Offer to celebrate special events such as birthday or other family events by inviting your child's family to your home or restaurant.
- Once a child has been returned home to his or her family, offer to maintain contact through phone calls and provide support to the family, as approved by the supervising agency.

Foster parents are frequently recognized for helping the children in their care open doors so that the kids can fly on their own. But as a foster parent, you also have a great opportunity to help not just the child, but for his or her family as a whole. As the old adage says, "Give your children roots and wings." Thanks to the many foster parents who are helping to keep those roots intact.

For more information, also see [Chapter 4: Developing and Maintaining Family Connections of the Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook](#).



Sources for this tip sheet

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Ithaca, New York 14850
(607) 272-0034

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