

## Setting Healthy Boundaries between Birth and Foster Families

Boundaries are essential in any kind of relationship—between parents and children, friends, employers and employees, and certainly between foster families and birth families. Simply stated, a boundary is anything that separates two things. For the purposes of communication and relationships, setting healthy boundaries means talking about what is and is not okay. Taking the time to put reasonable and healthy boundaries in place can mean more open communications between foster and birth families—as well as clearer expectations for everyone.

As foster parents, one of the ways you can help support a positive future for both the children in your care as well as the birth families with whom you interact is by working to

establish and model healthy boundaries. You may want to take some time to think about the boundaries you already have, as well as boundaries that you may need to strengthen or establish. Your licensing agency can also be a resource of help and information as you work through this process. Here are a few examples to get you started:

- How do you answer questions about the family story or background of the children in your care?

- How much personal information do you share about yourself and your family with the child’s birth family?
- How will birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions be handled?
- What type of contact do you prefer? For example, do you prefer phone calls or emails? What about contact via social media?
- How frequently will you have contact with the birth family? Are there limits on the number of calls per week or time of day?

(e.g., no phone calls after 8pm.)

- How will you answer any questions about the birth family from the child in your care?



In many cases, boundaries will likely start out rather firm and restricting, before becoming less rigid as parents

learn about each other and trust is established. For example, when a new child comes into your care, your initial boundaries may call for communication through a shared notebook, letters, or the case manager, whereas, after some time has passed, that boundary may relax to include emails, telephone numbers, or social media contact.

The good thing is that boundaries can always be adjusted! As your family grows and

Continued on page 2

changes—and as you care for different children or youth in foster care—you may want to take some time to periodically reassess what is safe and appropriate, as well as how the boundaries you have are affecting your family and the birth family.



So, what happens when a boundary is crossed? The best course of action is to have a conversation about what happened. Was something unclear? Was more information needed in order to facilitate a full understanding? Talk together, as members of the same team, about why the boundary is in place, how you feel it was crossed, and how you can work together to prevent something similar from happening again. You may be able to facilitate such conversations with the birth family directly, or you may need to involve a case manager for additional support.

We encourage you to approach such conversations from a place of understanding and respect. It may be helpful to remember that people develop their boundaries from life experience and their families. They are most likely also working on defining healthy boundaries with you, as well.

Boundaries serve an important purpose, specifically to protect and take care of yourself. In your family and personal relationships, including those with birth families, having healthy boundaries can mean a higher level of satisfaction in your day-to-day tasks and activities. It means the freedom

to make decisions based on what is best for you and for your family. On the other hand, a lack of healthy, clear boundaries may lead to burnout, higher levels of stress, and even possibly financial burdens. Setting boundaries also is a good way to model consistency—you say what you mean

and mean what you say. All in all, having healthy boundaries makes it easier to take care of yourself emotionally, physically, and mentally. All of which can help you be the best parent you can be.



## Resources

### Tip Sheets

- [Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of the Child First](#)
- [The Balance Beam: Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Kids](#)
- Partners: [Working with Birth Parents](#)

### Web Resources

- [Why it's Important to Have Boundaries in Relationships](#)
- [Establishing Healthy Boundaries](#)
- [How to Set Healthy Boundaries: 10 Examples + PDF Worksheets](#)

