

Resource Parents Partnering with Birth Parents To Benefit Children





About IFAPA

The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA) is a non-profit organization serving as a resource to foster, adoptive and kinship families in Iowa. Membership with IFAPA is free for Iowa's foster, adoptive and kinship families. IFAPA's mission is to empower, support and advocate for foster, adoptive and kinship families in Iowa. IFAPA provides training, peer support and resources to promote safety, permanency and well-being for Iowa's children.

**6864 NE 14th Street, Suite 5
Ankeny, IA 50023
800.277.8145 - Toll-free
515.289.4567 - Dsm area
www.ifapa.org - Website
ifapa@ifapa.org - Email**

Resource Parents Partnering with Birth Parents To Benefit Children

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Importance and Benefits.....	1-2
Shared Parenting & Decision Making.....	2-3
Overcoming Challenges.....	3-4
Communication Skills.....	5
Family Team Meetings.....	6-7
Family Interaction Plans.....	7-8
Facilitating Contact.....	9-10
Conclusion.....	10
Acknowledgements.....	11



Introduction

Why did you become a resource parent? Most people would answer this question by saying they want to help children and families, or they want to make a difference in a child's life. One way you can have a big impact on a child's life is by working with the birth parents to rebuild the family.

The role of resource parents includes an expectation to partner with the birth parents of the foster children in their homes. This partnership facilitates and supports reunification or another permanency plan. There are enormous benefits for children and families when resource families and birth families work together.

Some resource families find this concept challenging. Many feel it might not be safe for them or their family. Understandably, they may have negative opinions of parents who have maltreated their children. However, most resource parents who have worked closely with birth parents have found it to be rewarding. When everyone on the team is working towards the same goal of preserving and rebuilding the family for the long-term welfare of the child, relationships are strengthened and permanency can be achieved more quickly.



The information in this booklet will help resource parents gain a better understanding of the importance of positive connections with birth parents and ways resource parents can contribute to the success of these partnerships.

Importance & Benefits

It's important that children in care have ongoing and regular contact with their parents. Although children may experience some feelings of relief at being removed from a traumatic living situation, they will be dealing with issues of grief and loss as a result of being separated from their parents and other family members. Having regular contact can help minimize those grief and loss issues. It gives children the opportunity to see that their birth families are okay and that their family members still love and care for.

If children in care perceive that the adults in their lives are not cooperating, they may feel threatened. Seeing the resource parents and birth parents cooperating, allows children to relax and devote more of emotional energy to important developmental tasks of childhood.

When children are allowed to develop and maintain connections with all the adults who care for them, and are able to witness these adults cooperating for their benefit, they have the best of both worlds. Their relationship and ongoing contact with their birth parents are important as they form identities and self-concepts.

Working with birth parents can also help resource parents gain clearer understandings of the challenges facing birth parents. It may increase feelings of empathy for birth parents and may give resource parents an appreciation for the efforts birth parents are making to meet case plan goals.

Another positive result is that birth parents are reassured that resource parents are providing a nurturing and stable environment for their children during the time they are in out-of-home care.

When there is direct contact between resource parents and birth parents, resource parents can serve as mentors for birth parents. They can model effective parenting. They can provide learning opportunities for birth parent to practice parenting skills. They can also provide feedback to birth parents, pointing out specifically what the parent did that was effective as well as offering suggestions for ways a situation might be handled differently.

Shared Parenting & Decision Making

Shared parenting occurs when two or more adults have joint responsibility for the care, nurturing, and decision making for the same child. Many adults have experienced shared parenting in their own childhoods or with their children as they share parenting tasks with spouses, grandparents, day care providers, babysitters, and step parents.

In order for shared parenting to be successful, everyone involved must contribute to the effort. It requires good communication, cooperation, respect, careful planning, joint decision making, and an understanding of everyone's roles.

When children enter foster care, shared parenting becomes a day-to-day reality as birth parents, resource parents, case workers, and others all contribute to meeting the children's needs.

Developing positive relationships with birth families is crucial if resource families are going to provide the best possible care for the children in their homes. There are a number of things resource parents can do to help develop positive shared parenting relationships with birth parents. At initial meetings with birth families, they should ask birth parents about children's schedules, food preferences, and other likes and dislikes. Resource parents can provide a good basis for an ongoing, positive working relationship by valuing and respecting the information birth parents have about their children using that information to ease transitions to the resource home.

As the relationship develops during the time the child is in care, resource parents can consult the birth parents on decisions regarding their child and involve them in all possible day-to-day decisions about the child. Relationships grow and change over time; however, things might seem challenging at the beginning. When resource parents have more contact with the birth parents and begin to feel more comfortable with the relationship, they will grow more at ease having contact, sharing information, and coordinating parenting efforts with the birth family.

Even if the relationship between the resource family and the birth family is less than ideal, there are still things resource families can do to try to establish and maintain a good working relationship. They should make sure all communication with the birth parents is polite and professional. Resource parents should indicate by words and actions that they are willing to collaborate and cooperate with the birth parents.

Overcoming Challenges

There are some challenges that may need to be addressed to move toward more shared parenting situations between birth and resource parents.

The birth parent may initially exhibit feelings of anger or resentment towards the resource family. The child's attachment to the resource family may be perceived by the birth parent as a threat to his/her personal relationship with the child. Resource parents can play a vital role in

helping the birth family understand that they are supplementing and supporting their role in the child's life, rather than supplanting it.

Children may feel conflicted by loyalties to both their foster and birth families. To assist children in dealing with this conflict, resource parents can demonstrate by words and actions that children can love more than one parent.

Occasionally there are safety risks when working closely with birth families. A resource family should never feel that their safety or the safety of their family is at risk when working with birth families. Case management involves team members who assess any risk factors that may be present in an individual situation and develop safety plans. Such plans might involve progressions in family interactions, which ensure the safety of everyone including resource families. Even in situations where the resource parent and the birth parent do not have direct contact, the resource parent can still assist in strengthening the parent/child relationship by using respectful, positive language when discussing the birth parent.



Sometimes, a child's behavior becomes more challenging before or after a visit with the birth family. This may lead the resource parent to conclude that the contacts are a negative experience for the child and should be curtailed. It's crucial for resource parents to understand that some amount of stress and confusion is normal when children interact with their birth parents, and children use their behavior as one way to cope with stress. The transition times just before and after visits can be difficult. Provide reassurance and emotional support to children to help prepare for visits, and to allow children the opportunity to talk about their thoughts and feelings following visits.

If a child's behavior surrounding the visit times is extreme, the resource family should contact the DHS social worker. The DHS social worker may have insights into the issues the child is facing, or may recommend additional services or supports. It is important for the resource family to document and keep careful records of visits, events, appointments, and any issues arising in the child's life since they may be affecting the child's behavior.

Communication Skills



Communication is key to making a partnership work successfully. The way resource parents communicate with birth parents can be very important in initiating and maintaining a good working relationship. When communicating with birth parents, resource parents should strive to be professional, caring, objective, empathetic, and nurturing. Words should be chosen carefully, as once they are spoken, they cannot be recalled. Resource parents need to be honest in sharing feelings and concerns. This needs to be done in a way that is respectful, does not provoke the other person, and encourages both parties to listen to each other.

Communication involves not only the words that are spoken but the volume and tone used as well as body language. The same words can communicate an entirely different message if they are spoken loudly, sarcastically, or with a judgmental tone. In the same manner, facial expressions, posture, and gestures convey attitudes and feelings. Body language used gives the impression that the speaker or the listener is either open and caring or closed and reserved.

In addition to speaking, listening is an important part of communicating effectively. Listening and hearing are not the same thing. Hearing is passive, but listening is an active process that requires action on the part of the receiver. The skills of active and reflective listening can help improve mutual understanding. Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They may be distracted, thinking about something else, or planning their response to what the speaker is saying. Active listening requires the listener to pay full attention to what the speaker is saying. That can be followed by reflecting back to the speaker, in the listener's own words, what he or she thought was said. Some helpful phrases to use in reflective listening are "It sounds like...", "I wonder if...", "I think you are saying...", "Do I understand you to say...?" The use of active and reflective listening can be useful in engaging birth parents in conversation, in creating empathy, and in building positive relationships. If the birth parent feels that the resource parent is interested in his or her concerns and opinions and wants to listen, he or she is more likely to explain in detail what he or she feels and why. This decreases the possibility of misunderstanding. Treating others as you want to be treated goes a long way in building communication between resource parents and birth parents.

Family Team Meetings

Family team meetings can provide an excellent opportunity for birth families and resource families to meet and interact. The family team meeting is a process that brings together the family of the child in care, support systems such as friends, neighbors, and community members, and other resources such as DHS case workers, resource families, mental health professionals, educators, and others working with the family. The family team meeting is used to learn what the family hopes to accomplish; set reasonable and meaningful goals; recognize and affirm the family strengths; assess the family's needs; find solutions to meet the family's needs; design individualized supports and services that match the family's needs and build upon the family's strengths; reach agreement about who is responsible for agreed upon tasks; and agree on next steps. The family team meeting draws upon the wisdom and expertise of the family and their friends as well as the resources, experience, and expertise of the professionals to assure safety and meet the needs of the child and the family.

If a family team meeting is held shortly after the child is removed from the home and placed in foster care, it may provide the first opportunity for the resource family and the birth family to meet. It's important for the resource family to understand that at this initial meeting, the birth parents are likely still in the initial stages of the grief cycle after having their child removed from the home. This may affect their behavior. Birth parents may appear angry and may make demands or threats. The resource family should not let that anger or other behavior prevent them from treating the birth family with compassion. This may be difficult if the child has been abused or neglected. But it's important to remember that the child loves his or her parents and the usual plan is for the child and parent to safely reunify. The resource family's behavior towards the birth parents at the initial meeting can have a big impact on the development of a positive working relationship. Birth parents need assurance that their children are safe and being well cared for and that resource families want to work with them to help the family reunite.

Resource families may use this meeting to learn important information about the child and to let the parents know that they value the information the birth parents can provide about their child. Resource parents may ask detailed questions about the child to better equip themselves to successfully parent the child. The questions should include special dietary needs or the child's favorite foods. Specific questions should also include: Do they have any allergies? Do they have specific

fears and what helps to calm them? What is their bedtime routine? Their education needs? Resource parents may also ask the birth parents what questions they have for the resource parents. Even if birth parents don't initially have any specific questions, resource parents should provide some information. The birth parents will likely want to know who lives in the resource family home. Does their child have a room of his/her own? Who is the primary caregiver in the home? What is the daily routine? How is the child reacting to being away from the parent? After resource parents share this general information, birth parents will probably feel more comfortable in asking additional questions. Resource parents should also leave an open invitation for more questions if the birth family should think of them later.

After both the birth parents and the resource parents have had an opportunity to have questions answered, with the help of the social worker and others involved in the case, a relationship of shared parenting can begin to develop.

Family Interaction Plans

Resource parents have probably seen a range of practices related to how and when children in their homes see their birth parents. Perhaps at times, a child's contact with his/her birth parents was linked to how well the parents were meeting the expectations detailed in the case plan. For example, did the parent obtain the evaluations outlined in the case plan as his or her responsibility to complete? Had the parent "cooperated" with required services? That approach to managing parents' behaviors by controlling their contact with their children doesn't represent what research shows as best practice and in the best interest of children.

Here's what is best for kids:

- When children are in foster care it is essential that they have many opportunities to see their birth parents so the parent-child bond can be maintained.
- Visits need to be frequent. The younger the child, the more often they need to see his or her birth parents.
- Visits need to take place in settings that allow the birth parent to practice age-appropriate caregiving of his or her child. Children develop healthy attachments to parents when the parents are able to actively meet the children's needs.
- When children see their parents more frequently, children will move more quickly to permanence, either by returning home or by moving to another permanent placement.

Iowa has recently taken steps toward changing the approach to parent-child interactions. One change is from “visits” to “Family Interaction.” Using the term “family interaction” helps to reinforce that there is more to a parent’s contact with his or her child than just seeing or visiting.

The philosophy of family interaction is that parents and children have the right to spend time together. The primary purpose of family interaction is to maintain the parent-child relationship and to strengthen family attachments. Frequent family interactions will help the child feel secure, establish a secure-based attachment, and reduce the sense of abandonment, which children often experience in out-of-home placements. Some of the goals of family interaction are to:

- Enhance the parent’s ability to adequately and appropriately care for and relate to his or her child.
- Establish or maintain a secure attachment with his or her child.
- Develop a sense of “being with” his or her child during times of needs.
- Identify and resolve problems before the child is returned to the parent’s care.
- Develop and practice new parenting behaviors and patterns of interaction.
- Maintain relationships with siblings, parents, and other individuals.
- Provide opportunities to assess caregiver needs.
- Maintain meaningful contact consistent with the development and/or special needs of the child that will further progress toward achieving permanency for the child.

As the family interaction model is implemented across Iowa, resource parents will see more concrete, comprehensive plans for parent-child contacts. These plans will be called Family Interaction Plans, and resource parents will play an important role. As children see their birth parents more frequently, resource parents may be asked to do more schedule-juggling. Resource parents will have more contact with birth parents, whether through the birth parent coming to the resource parent home to help provide care for their children or coordinating family interaction logistics. Ultimately, the resource family’s involvement in family interaction plans will be better for the children.



Facilitating Contact

There are many things resource parents can do to help encourage and facilitate contact between birth parents and their children. The involvement of resource families with birth parents and the types of interactions can range from activities that involve minimal contact to those that require significant contact and involvement with birth families. Always ensure that the child's case worker is aware of and approves of any interaction plans.

Some possibilities are for resource families to:

- Keep journals on the activities of the children and share them with the birth family.
- Take pictures of the child's activities to share with the birth family and display pictures of the birth family in the child's room and in the home.
- Save notes, schoolwork, art projects, etc. for the birth parents to see and ask the birth family if they would like to keep them.
- Facilitate phone calls between the child and the birth family.
- Provide transportation to and from visits when possible.
- Assist and encourage the birth family and the child to work on a life book together.
- Include the birth family members in school activities such as conferences, parents' nights, and athletic events as well as in medical or dental appointments. When birth parents attend such functions and appointments, the resource family should make sure that the medical and school personnel know they are the child's parent and should encourage discussion of the child's needs with the parents. This can allow the birth parents to practice normal parenting skills while the resource parent plays a mentoring and supportive role.
- Allow family interactions to take place in the resource family home and involve the birth parents in normal child care tasks such as bathing, feeding, reading stories, or tucking into bed.

While resource parents might feel some initial hesitation at opening their homes to birth parents, there are many benefits. It provides a safe, comfortable environment for the child. It demonstrates to the birth parent and the child that the resource parent values the importance of their relationship. It allows the resource parent to monitor the activities between the birth parents and the child. It helps alleviate anxiety that can arise in the child before and after visits. When the child sees the resource parents and the birth parents working together, it minimizes loyalty conflicts, and it eliminates the need to transport the child to and from a visit site.

When good working relationships are established during the time the child is in foster care, it's likely that the birth parent will want that relationship to continue after reunification. Reunification can be stressful and challenging for everyone involved. Support from the resource family is crucial to helping the family be successful in staying together and keeping the children safe. Resource parents should continue to serve as mentors and provide occasional respite. Continuing to have a relationship with the birth family and the children after reunification also helps the resource family deal with their own emotions and feelings of loss when a child leaves the home.

Conclusion

Resource families partnering with birth parents can be crucial in helping to maintain the child-parent connection and to facilitate positive outcomes for children and families. While challenges exist, they can be overcome and there are rewards and benefits for the birth parents, the resource family, and most importantly the children.



Acknowledgements

This publication was compiled utilizing information from the following sources:

- *Family Interaction: The Expressway to Permanency-Facilitating Successful Visitation* training provided by Norma Ginther
- *Fostering Perspectives* newsletters from the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program
- *Strengthening the Partnership: Family Team Decision Making* training provided by Jan LeBahn
- *Working with Birth Families* training presented by Mike McGuire for IFAPA
- *Working with Birth Parents: Visitation* training from Foster Parent College
- *PS-MAPP training Leader's Guide*



**An electronic version of this
publication can be found
on the IFAPA website
at www.ifapa.org.**



Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association

6864 NE 14th Street, Suite 5

Ankeny, IA 50023

800-277-8145

www.ifapa.org

*This booklet was funded by the Iowa Department of Human Services
and the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association.*