

Building Relationships in Foster Care through Shared Parenting

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Shared Parenting:

A supportive, positive relationship between birth parents and out-of-home caregivers (e.g. foster parents, kinship placements) so the parent and child may maintain a relationship, when appropriate.

Trauma-Informed Shared Parenting Court Committee

- Juvenile Presiding Judge– identified the benefit of foster/kinship and birth parents working together
- Called together a committee to focus on supporting shared parenting in out system
- Committee began meeting in May 2018

Trauma-Informed Shared Parenting Court Committee

- Committee is a multi-disciplinary group of professionals involved in the child welfare system
 - Juvenile Presiding Judge
 - Court Administration Staff
 - DCS
 - Foster Licensing Agencies
 - Behavioral Health/Mercy Care
 - CASA
 - Attorneys
 - Family Involvement Center
 - Birth Parents
 - Foster Parents
 - Kinship Caregivers

Trauma-Informed Shared Parenting Court Committee

- Create a culture change within the child welfare system where trauma-informed care and caregivers working with birth parents towards family reunification goal is the norm
 - Increase the number of caregivers who engage with birth parents to support reunification
 - Increase the number of caregivers who understand the impact of trauma, including for the child, parent, and family as a whole, and are equipped to respond to trauma symptoms they may see
 - Increase awareness of trauma and benefits of the shared parenting approach across the child welfare system (including DCS, the Court, and provider agencies)
 - Ensure DCS, Court, and provider agency policies use common language and support a shared parenting approach

Trauma-Informed Shared Parenting Court Committee

Committee Activities:

Shared Parenting Readiness Assessment

Focus Groups (9 groups/80 participants)

Foster Licensing Agencies, Behavioral Health, DCS, Attorneys, CASAs, Foster Parents, Kinship Caregivers, birth parents

Surveys

Key Informant Interviews (21 Interviews)

Parents, families, volunteers, and professional stakeholders

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Current Practices:

“Inconsistency – It depends”

There is inconsistent engagement and inconsistent expectations

The occurrence of shared parenting depends on several factors:

- **Discretion of caregivers**
- **Emotional stability and presence of parents**
- **Expectations communicated by the court**
- **DCS, attorneys, behavioral health, licensing agencies and other parties affiliated with the case**
- **Formality of education and facilitated communication between parents and caregivers**

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Current Practices:

“The decision (to engaged in shared parenting) lies with the foster parent. It is really difficult for DCS to find foster homes and keep foster homes. Some people (foster parents) are never going to get to that point (engaging with the parents). Sometimes it’s who they are and what they want to get out of the (fostering) experience. Sometimes it’s about the birth parent and they aren’t ready.”

- Guardian ad Litem

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Current Practices:

“Shared parenting is emphasized at (foster licensing) training, but once in placements there is little emphasis on working with parents. We need clearer structure for relationships.”

**-Foster parent, three
years fostering**

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Identified Challenges:

- **Adversary between foster/kin and parents**
- **Lack of ALL parents – foster/kin/bio – involvement**
- **Family trauma specific to kin placements**
- **Foster parent motivations**
- **Undefined expectations and accountability**
- **Overwhelmed child welfare system**

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Identified Challenges:

- **Adversary/conflict between foster/kin and parents**
- **Lack of ALL parents – foster/kin/bio – involvement**
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Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Identified Challenges:

- **Conflict between parents**
“The stigma is so loud” explains on parent.

Juvenile proceedings are, by nature, adversarial. But lack of information and education, negative messaging, professional bias, and limited contact between parents can exacerbate the hostility

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Identified Challenges:

- **Fears and Anxieties**

Negative assumptions, fears, and anxieties are often exacerbated by the unknown. Without knowing each other, parents often assume the worst about one another and imagine harm may be inflicted upon the child or themselves

“I have seen placements purposefully make appointments when parents can’t go because they are afraid of the parent and feel they cannot control the situation.” – DCS Specialist

“I don’t know who is taking care of my child. What if they (foster parents) are hurting them? These people could be hurting my child.”

- Parent who was subject to abuse as a child

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Escalating Tensions:

- **Interpersonal conflict**
- **Child behaviors after parenting time**
- **Professional bias**
- **Lack of information and updates about child**

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Lack of Parent Involvement:

- **Information about child**
- **Involvement in decision-making**
- **Access to social supports**
- **Knowledge about & opportunity for visits**
- **Systemic disrespect**
- **Facilitation of communication**

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

“It helps if we (caregiver) don’t have to ask the kids questions. The kids want to know you have some control...and here you are asking 100 questions, and you don’t really have another option. You don’t have the birth certificate so you have to say, ‘how old are you?’”

-Foster parent of an 8 year old girl

“Foster parent says to parent aide, ‘Can you tell me whether mom and dad have fed child on the visit?’ Then parent aide says, ‘I can’t tell you anything about the visit.’ So over time, it feels one-sided, and it starts to wear you down.”

-Foster Licensing Staff

“We tell families to communicate but do not facilitate it. We need to facilitate the first meeting between parents and reduce the awkwardness.”

-Court Staff

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Kin-Specific Challenges:

- **Adhering to boundaries**
- **Emotional trauma**
- **History of family trauma**
- **Little to no support**

“Shared parenting is a great thing when it can happen. I also think there needs to be boundaries. When my child was placed with my sister, I had free reign to do whatever I wanted. I was able to come put my child to bed and be with my daughter as much as I wanted. But, I noticed it was messing up my sister’s household because my daughter kept wanting me to stay.”

-Parent of a 4 year-old

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Foster Motivations:

The desire to adopt is why some parents may choose to foster. Other parents may not go into fostering with the intent to adopt but over time may change their mind as they fall in love with the child. In these situations, foster families may be less inclined to help parents get their children back.

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Other Challenges:

- **Undefined parent-child contact**
- **Inconsistent policies**
- **Overwhelmed system**

“I personally feel that the biggest hurdle or problem with shared parenting is lack of communication, as a policy, between DCS, licensing, and the parent aide. It’s confusion about these foster parents feeling pushed (to do shared parenting) from one side and being told from another that they should not (engage in shared parenting).”

-CASA

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Recommendations:

Reduce conflict between parents through:

- Immediate indirect communication
- Empathy building
- Facilitated meetings
- Greater parental engagement (all parents)

“Change the way the system communicates about parents. Portray parents to foster parents like, ‘Here is a family that needs help versus this is a family that did this, this, and this.’”

-Foster Licensing Staff

Findings from the Readiness Assessment

Recommendations:

Define Expectations:

- **Priority of shared parenting**
- **Clearly defined roles and responsibilities**
- **Expectations about reunification**
- **Who engages in shared parenting**
- **Methods of accountability**
- **Training and Education**

Trauma-Informed Shared Parenting Court Committee

Next Steps:

Policy

Training

Family Engagement

2-4-2 Book Sharing

Shared Parenting Tool Kit

Creating an information document to be completed
by birth and foster/kinship placements

Benefits of Shared Parenting

When children can maintain a connection with their family, through on-going interactions, they:

- Begin to work through feelings of grief and loss
- Can be reassured that their family is okay
- Are more likely to maintain connections with their family and see their parent(s) still love them

Benefits of Shared Parenting

Studies show that when caregivers and parents work together:

- Children exhibit less internalized and externalized behaviors
- Have fewer placement disruptions
- Have higher family functioning and parent-child attachment scores
- Increases the chances of reunification or quicker decision by parent that adoption may be best for their child

Examples of Shared Parenting

- Exchanging letters – providing information
- Communication Notebooks
- Creating an email address to exchange emails
- Sharing pictures (having a picture of the birth parents at the foster/kinship placement)
- Attending doctor/other appointments together
- Phone calls

Examples of Shared Parenting

- 2-4-2 Book program
- Parents attending school events
- Facilitating contact outside of visitation
- Inviting the parent to the foster/kinship placement's home so parent can participate in daily activities of care: mealtime, bathing, bedtime routines

Examples from C2C

- Foster/kinship caregiver transporting the child to visitation or therapy with the parent and engaging with parent at beginning or end of session
- Foster/kinship caregiver participating in a visit or a session with the parent and child
- Email exchanges
- Foster parent who facilitated sibling visits between the foster child and her siblings who were not in care

Examples from C2C

- Kinship placement allowing parent to come to the home in the morning and bedtime to participate in caregiving routines
- Foster/kinship provider inviting parent to birthday parties and other holidays
- Foster/Kinship caregiver advocating for parent at CFT's and with service providers

Examples from C2C

- Foster parent inviting birth parent to attend church with them
- Foster parent picking up birth parent to transport to CFTs and other meetings when a parent had to spend hours on the bus to get there
- Foster parent allowing birth parent to stay at their home with the child when they went out of town to avoid missing parenting time and placing the child in respite care

Examples from C2C

- After meeting a foster placement at C2C one father stated, “We have been wondering what she (foster mother) looked like for over a year, it seems like she cares about our children.”
- Another parent stated: “In my first case I didn’t have contact with the foster parent and I spent the whole case worried about my daughter. This time I know her foster parents and I know they are taking care of my daughter, so I could focus on my self and make the changes I needed to make to be a better parent.”