

Shared Parenting and Alliance Building: Benefits to the Children, Foster Parents and Parents of Children in Foster Care

Benefits to the child in foster care: When foster parents and the agency work to build constructive partnerships with birth families, the child may receive the following benefits:

1. The child will have more of a feeling of connectedness.
2. The child will not feel or actually be cut off from both immediate needs as well as the less tangible needs that birth parents can offer.
3. The child will not feel torn between adults.
4. If the child has the security that adults are acting together in his or her best interests, the child is free to be a child (the child will not have to worry about taking care of himself or herself, self-parenting).
5. If the child has the security that adults are acting together in his or her best interests, the child is free to resume normal development, which has probably been interrupted by the confusion that led to the child's placement; this confusion may have included the child having to take on roles a child normally would not take on, which interferes with a child's development.
6. Children will be better able to manage and tolerate multiple-adult relationships if they perceive the adults in their life as working together, rather than being in conflict. When adults are in conflict, a child may become, for instance, detached or can tend not to venture out for relationships or can have conflicting relationships.
7. When children have contact with birth parents, they are better able to work through some of the painful feelings they have from the separation that resulted from placement into care. Though the short-term effect of seeing birth parents may be that the child is upset, the long-term effects are generally beneficial.
8. When children are able to work through emotions by seeing birth parents, their behavior is likely to improve.
9. If children are able to see birth parents and express their feelings, they are less likely to misdirect their painful or angry feelings toward foster parents.
10. Regular birth parent visits strongly increase the chances of reunification.
11. Regular contact with birth parents helps the child see how much progress they are making toward bringing the child home.
12. Even when birth parents do not follow through by coming to visits or by coming to visits in a

nurturing way, these experiences help children to come to recognize and understand their parents' limitations, which can emotionally ease the child's passage from foster care to adoption or independent living.

Benefits to the Foster Parents: When foster parents and the agency work to build constructive partnerships with birth families, the foster parents may receive the following benefits:

1. By building partnerships with birth parents, foster parents become more an active part of the professional child welfare team.
2. If foster parents build a partnership with the birth parents, they are not limited to receiving all of their information about the child through the caseworker.
3. If foster parents build a partnership with the birth parents, they get their own firsthand experience of what they can directly ask the birth parents for and what the birth parents want from them.
4. Through partnership, foster parents can be a more direct contributor in the shared parenting role. For example, a foster mother might confide to a birth father that the birth father's daughter said she believed he hates her. This first hand testimony could have much more of a direct impact on the father than if the foster mother told it to the worker who in turn told it to the father. Also in such a case, the father is hearing things from both the caseworker and the foster parent. Hearing from several people can be more motivating and seem more real than hearing from only one. The foster parent's involvement might be the added ingredient that motivates the father to make a serious effort at helping his daughter know that he does not hate her.
5. A foster parent's first hand experience of working with birth parents may result in the foster parent feeling reassurance that the birth parents are working to try to care for their child.
6. Working in partnership with birth parents increases the foster parents' chances of developing genuine empathy for the birth parents, which will increase the foster parents' commitment in supporting teamwork. First hand experience may give the foster parent a clearer understanding and empathy for how difficult it is for the birth parents to change their lives or to achieve goals. When a foster parent recognizes this, foster parents may see a birth parent's efforts in a new light; by more clearly seeing a birth parent's obstacles, foster parents will better appreciate how the birth parent's efforts may be more significant and heart-felt than they first appeared.
7. When the child knows the foster parents are working with his or her birth parents, the foster parents are offering the child the security that adults are acting together in his or her best interests.
8. By working in partnership, foster parents will have the satisfaction of knowing they are supporting the child's sense of security. If the child has the security that adults are acting together in his or her best interests, the child is free to resume normal development, which has probably been interrupted by the confusion that led to the child's placement.

9. Greater contact with birth parents helps foster parents from becoming overly attached to the child because they are better able to see when a child and his or her parents belong together.

10. When foster parents work in partnership with birth parents, the foster parents can better support the agency in assessing what birth parents can or cannot do.

11. When foster parents are willing to work in partnership with birth parents, birth parents will sometimes tell valuable things to the foster parents that they would not tell the caseworker. Such information can add critical pieces to the puzzle's picture of how best to help the birth family and the child.

12. Foster parents and birth parents can share information in how best to care for the child. Obviously, the birth parents have critical parenting needs, or their child would not be in care. Nonetheless, we would be counterproductively stereotyping to assume the birth parents are simply "bad parents." The birth parents have lived with the child over enough time to know the child's daily routine and many useful details about the child. If the birth parents were to mention that the child loves to go to a local park to look at the ducks, the foster parents have learned about an activity that can give the child a sense of comfortable continuity by taking the child to a place he or she loved before so many changes began happening in his or her life. A foster mother may say to a birth mother that she is having trouble getting the child to do his homework after school. The birth parent may say she always gave the boy an hour after school to do fun things, like watch television or read comic books. The foster mother would say that the boy has never come straight home from school to begin doing homework, and she might adjust when she expects him to do his homework, allowing him to stay with his familiar pattern.

13. Foster parents can be extremely valuable by providing a model of parenting that the birth parents can see first hand and learn from.

14. When birth parents and foster parents communicate, they can normalize confusing things for one another. For example, a foster father may take a child to a mall when the child is in the process of having his level of Ritalin reduced. At the mall, the child begins screaming hysterically. Finally, the foster father simply picks the child up and tucks him under his arm and carries him out of the mall as matter-of-factly as a mailman carrying a parcel. Once outside the mall and away from people, the foster father felt less stressfully conspicuous in working to calm the child. If the foster parent told the birth parents about this episode, several good things could result. For one, the foster parent would be sharing a parenting technique that the birth parents might use with the child. But the birth parents might share that the child has behaved similarly many times at stores and malls. By sharing this information, both the birth parents and foster parents would see that the child's behavior has been part of a pattern over time. They would both see that the child has acted the same way with other people. Both sets of parents might feel somewhat relieved upon learning this, that they personally were not doing something "bad" or "stupid" that made the child behave in that way. Both sets of parents might be able to accept that the experience of needing to manage the child's tantrums in public is simply going to be a normal part of parenting the child. Although the foster parent may not be managing the child's

tantrums much more successfully than did the birth parents, there is comfort in two adults coming together with the same issue to deal with and collaborate in solving.

Benefits to parents of children in foster care: When foster parents and the agency work to build constructive partnerships with birth families, the birth parents may receive the following benefits:

1. With partnership, birth parents remain empowered to be a child's parent, rather than feeling and/or being pushed to the side.
2. When birth parents having more contact with the child and more participation through partnership, the parents will not forget how difficult parenting is. The more contact they have with their child, the better they are able to measure their own ability and interest in parenting and the reunification of their family.
3. Birth parents, through partnership, are treated as contributing adults in the child's life, which encourages the birth parents to expand and modify what they can contribute for the child.
4. Partnership gives birth parents a greater ability to know what is expected of them and to ask clearly what they expect of team members.
5. Through partnership, birth parents are included in decision-making.
6. Through partnership, birth parents are more directly supported in planning how to change in a way that will lead to the reunification of their family.
7. Partnership allows birth parents to be participatory in a process which has great bearing on their own circumstances.
8. Partnership includes parents in a way that makes it likely for them to be a part of significant events in their child's life, whether it is to be at the child's birthday or at the child's school for an independent educational program meeting.
9. When the agency and foster parents work in partnership with birth parents, they are not isolating the birth parents. Unification and isolation are opposites: how can a goal of reunification efficiently be achieved if the agency and foster parents isolate the birth parents?
10. Partnership provides birth parents with a process for achieving greater well-being for their child.
11. Partnership provides birth parents with a process for their achieving success in parenting.