



# Co-Parenting

## The Key to Reunification

**Becoming a foster parent is a privilege, not a given right.** It comes with a great deal of public trust and responsibility. This vast responsibility requires a strong partnership among the foster parents, the Department of Children and Families and Community-Based Care Agencies. As team members, each member will work in collaboration to resolve any issues and maintain a child-centered focus.

— Florida Department of Children and Families Bilateral Service Agreement

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**I go see my kid at their house.  
It's a much nicer place than mine.  
I know they think I'm a bad person  
and they're judging everything  
I do because I made some  
mistakes. It hurts. I want to see my  
kids but these visits are painful.  
The guilt is overwhelming.**

.....  
**— Birth parent**

When a child enters the dependency system, the state of Florida assumes the parental responsibility of protecting and nurturing that child until a permanent home can be created. For young children, whose intellectual, physical and emotional development is racing, permanency efforts must also be in high gear. While delays are damaging to all children, they have a disproportionate effect on the very young. Months, or even years, of uncertainty shape their development in ways that become harder to correct every day.

Co-parenting—the sharing of nurturing by birth parents, foster parents, and the case managers—is known to speed permanency and protect the child's development. But it is a hard process and each of the parties has reasons not to do it. Child advocates want to change that.

# Selling Co-Parenting

**Trudy Petkovich** Florida State Foster Adoptive Parent Association and long-time Dade County foster and adoptive parent

We know co-parenting is in the best interest of the children who come into the system. But one of the stumbling blocks to reunification right now is that the resource parents—those that become foster parents because of the possibility of adoption—do not understand their role. Co-parenting is a hard sell for them. I didn't come in to foster care to adopt, but even with one of the daughters that I did end up adopting, I made a connection with the birth mom. When she gave up her rights, she had been in my home, she liked me.

I have a colleague who wanted to adopt. But she did create a bond with the Dad and he did get his child back. It wasn't her intent but she grew to see the potential and she was very proud that she was able to do this. She ended up continuing to help the Dad, babysitting on the week-ends and continuing to play a role in the child's life.

It doesn't always work that way. Many foster parents see themselves as being better at caring for the children, whether for a short time or forever. They are unable to acknowledge that in the right, or wrong, circumstances we all have the potential to abuse or neglect a child. We don't ask foster parents to co-parent. It can be just simple communication. Write a note. You might have to write fifteen notes before you get one back.

I worked with a mom who seemed really scary. She was tall, overpowering looking. I wasn't sure she was ready to have the child back. But she would come from Miami Beach to see the child. She brought appropriate toys. She would call and ask me how to make a turkey, and she came on Christmas day. I started this relationship with the notes. Then I would meet her at court. I had to take a class to see her at her drug treatment program. If you step out to bridge that gap, you may have a lifetime relationship with the child. It is hard to teach the value of this in a class. You have to have mentors. When I started I had panic attacks. I turned to an older foster parent who could tell me how to handle things.

## So Why Not? *(Lutz, 2005, Foster 2008)*

Collaboration between case managers, birth parents and foster parents is clearly essential to reunification. Despite the shared interest in the child, this is not always easy to achieve.

### Foster Parents

- They are not always given the information they need to understand and care for the child.
- They are not always included in the case planning process. They feel their roles in the process are unclear.
- They often do not receive a copy of the case plan and when they meet with the birth parents they don't know what progress is being made or how close they are to reunification.
- They feel if they really speak their minds, the children in care will be removed and the agencies will not use them for placements anymore.

### Case Managers

- They need more training to supervise visits that include both the birth parent and the foster parent.
- Arranging visits with the birth parents is often difficult. Scheduling with the third party, the foster parent, adds complexity and time.
- They need to better understand what they can and cannot share with the foster families.
- They need training to understand the dynamics of attachment in young children.

### Birth Parents

While foster parents and case managers are likely to understand the trauma that the child has experienced, it may be harder to understand the trauma that the birth parent has also gone through. Birth parents have been described as going through their own stages in this trauma.

- **Shock:** Even with what may seem like obvious reasons for removal, the birth parents are in disbelief, and overwhelmed with worries about the child. They may have strong reactions. Anger, bargaining with the social worker, even physical reactions can occur.
- **Protest:** Grief becomes more physical. Parents can be sad or angry, and often have health responses: Headaches, insomnia, loss of appetite, stomach problems. They can turn in anger and blame everyone for the situation.
- **Adjustment:** With support from the foster parent, the case manager and others, such as a guardian ad litem, therapist, or other community resources, the birth parent can become calmer and participate positively in reunification efforts.



## Parallel Process is the Key

**Connie Lillas, PhD, MFT, RN** Chief Faculty  
Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic,  
Zero to Three Fellow and author



Our foster kids are the most complex kids of all, often cutting across developmental disabilities, mental health, physical health and educational delays. For traumatized children, we need to both look at the quality of engagement with the parent and individual differences. Foster kids miss out on both of these. To me, the biggest issue is how we recruit foster parents.

There are four possible problematic reasons people become foster parents that can adversely affect an infant's or young child's development: 1) they enter the system as a business, often providing sound custodial care but none of the essential emotional care; 2) they've had a loss and they want to adopt, and thus, are often not willing to help with reunification efforts; 3) they want to save a baby but are not interested in helping a family; and 4) they are good at reunification efforts but they don't want to adopt, so the infant is left to transition,

yet again, to another set of relationships if reunification fails.

If we're going to change this, we have to breed a new group of foster parents. Maybe we need to think about people more in their 50's who will now live to be a healthy 80. They have experience, they don't need to be a parent. Almost like a grandparent. Someone who can tolerate an immature birth parent who needs a role model. It would be a different motivation.

I see this as systems change. In our project in Los Angeles, we're targeting faith-based groups and even university alumni groups. Parents who have had children taken away usually have had terrible parents themselves. Their procedural memories—how they were programmed to view relationships—are tied to angry parents, anxious, intrusive parents, or depressed parents. They were never nurtured themselves so they don't know how to nurture others.

The parallel process means that what we do for those parents, how we interact with them, is what they will learn to do for their own child. Anger management classes alone aren't going to do it. We need foster parents who can establish nurturing relationships with the birth parents, while at the same time coaching birth parents toward joyful engagement with their babies. By sharing the baby we can begin to avoid some of the poor starts and relational losses the babies in our system have had to endure.

## There is a Father

When we picture a foster parent and birth parent co-parenting, we think of two mothers, or perhaps with a foster dad helpfully in the background. The birth mother is seen as a single parent, often with a series of irresponsible partners. But where is the father? He is a birth parent too.

Fathers are a powerful influence on a child's development, whether they are present or not. Physician Kyle Pruett from the Yale Child Study Center describes this influence. "Children whose fathers are not in their daily lives start looking for their fathers as soon as it becomes clear to them that kids have moms and dads....I have seen the search countless times:



Children who can't find their fathers make one up....In a young child who has not felt some form of masculine nurture, the hunger for a paternal presence can be insatiable."

Family researchers have documented that fathers interact

differently with their children than mothers do and have an important role in children's socialization and ability to regulate emotions. Fathers tend to play more actively than mothers, and help children work through physical and intellectual challenges even in the face of frustration.

It may take some special efforts to bring a birth father into the picture, but it is important not to write off the possibility. It is impossible for a man to feel like a father and commit to a child without visitation. It may have been the birth mother herself who initially banned the father.

But if the birth father cannot be involved, finding a male "co-parent" for a young child is still important, whether it is a foster parent, other family member, or a committed volunteer.

## Ideas for Supporting Co-Parenting for Case Managers and Foster Parents

- The terms *co-parenting* or *cooperation* or *collaboration* imply an equality that will probably not ring true to the birth parent. The state, the case manager, and even the foster parent have more power than the parent trying to work toward reunification.

- The foster parent should try to contact the birth parent as soon as possible. If a meeting is not possible, call the birth parents, to offer reassurance or write notes: *I will take care of your child until he can go back home. I know you miss each other.*
- Ask the birth parent questions about the child. Demonstrate respect for the parent's knowledge of the child: *What is his favorite food? What is she afraid of? When she's upset, what do you do to comfort her? How do you get her to go to sleep?*
- Understand the birth parent's anger as an expression of grief. Try not to show your own anger.
- Use reflective listening. Lecturing and being the authority won't be helpful. Reflective listening means first, listening, and then rephrasing what you hear to show you understand the feelings. The parent says: *I hate having my kid living in this neighborhood.* Even knowing the child was removed from a dangerous setting, the case manager or foster parent can say: *I can tell you're worried that he will feel scared and lost here.*
- Encourage the birth parent to ask questions. *What are you telling my child about why he can't be at home? Where does he sleep? Does he have any friends? Are you trying to adopt him?*
- The case manager, birth parent and foster parent should develop a plan for the visitation schedule and activities. Birth parents may be able to join their children and the foster parents at medical appointments, school activities and meetings, church functions, community activities, birthdays, holidays, and summer activities. Make sure to introduce the birth parent as the child's parent.
- Talk positively to the child about the birth parents: *Your mom really cares about you. I bet your mom will like to see this drawing. Your mom is going to be really proud of you. Your mom is going to school at night...isn't that great?*
- Focusing and building on a child's strengths is a well-known parenting skill. But it is also important for strengthening the birth parent. They have not heard a lot of good things about themselves. *Your new hair cut looks great! Eric says he likes your chocolate cake. How do you make it? Ella is much more calm during the visits. I think you're doing a great job...I know its not easy. I heard you passed your GED...we should celebrate at the next visit.*
- Foster parents should consider continuing the relationship after reunification. Offer to stay involved by babysitting occasionally or doing some family activities together. Reunification can be stressful. The support of the foster parents can help the family succeed in staying together.

# Co-Parenting is Common Sense

**The Honorable Judge Jeri Cohen**  
11th Circuit Juvenile Court



In the last several years, privatization has created a more innovative and responsive child welfare system in Miami. One of the areas that remains mired in past practice is foster care. Until we begin viewing our foster parents as partners with the biological parents in the reunification process, we will

continue to sabotage reunification efforts and fail to achieve best results for the children in our care.

Our foster parents should serve as models and cheerleaders for parents during the reunification process. Caseworkers and judges must be trained on how to promote a co-parenting philosophy so that biological families see foster parents as partners instead of enemies. This can be difficult since

concurrently the foster families must be supported in their desire to provide permanent homes to the children that they are fostering. While this is challenging, it is possible as long as system players provide a consistent message and the system is transparent and compassionate.

I have been using this approach in my courtroom for several years, and have seen improved outcomes for foster and biological families, but most importantly for children. Recently, I presided over a drug court case where the children were in preadoptive foster care. As the parents began recovering, the foster family, who had really been co-parenting with the parents, actually recommended reunification. The foster family continues to spend Sundays with the children, and will become Godparents to one at an upcoming baptism.

Our system needs to change the way it trains caseworkers, foster parents and judges. We need to redefine family and relationships. It truly takes a village to raise a child.

## Reunification Depends on Visitation

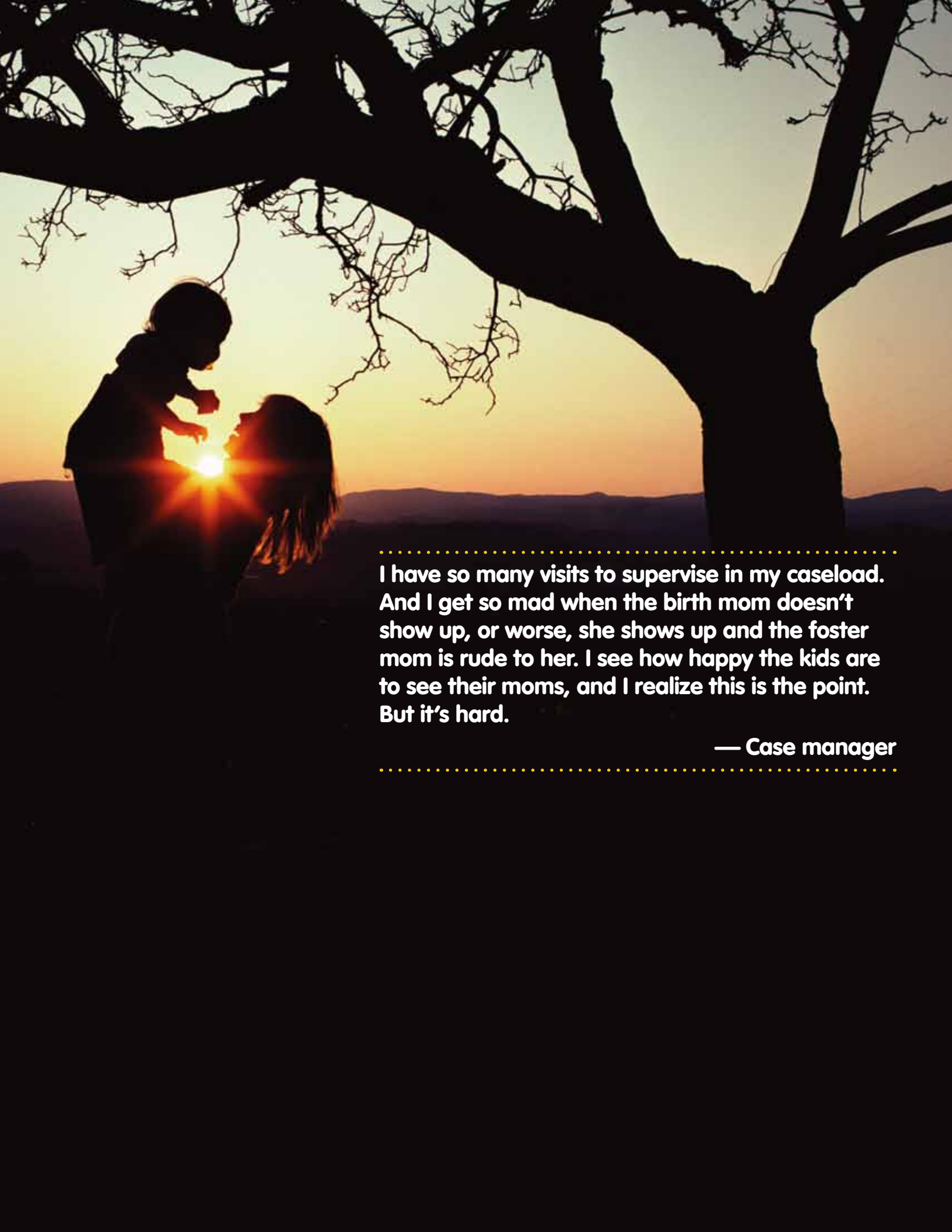
A variety of research studies have shown the powerful influence of regular visitation between the birth parent and the child in achieving reunification. Here are some of the conclusions:

- Two out of three children who enter foster care because of a harmful family situation are reunited with their birth parents within two years.
- Visitation between parents and their children in foster care is the most important factor in successful reunification. Frequent visits means quicker reunification.
- Birth parent show up more if visits start right away. If the visit occurs within 48 hours, the rate of parents showing up for visits increases dramatically.

- Foster children seeing their birth parents at least once every two weeks showed fewer behavior problems, less anxiety and less depression.
- The birth mother's visits are a stronger predictor of reunification than her problems, such as substance abuse.
- Visits in the birth parent's home or the foster home were both associated with more frequent maternal visiting than when visits are done at fast food restaurants, an agency or other location.
- The birth mother's participation in case reviews and other activities in the child's life is associated with more frequent visiting.

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**I'm furious! The case manager has told us now that Jeff will spend Christmas with his birth mother. We've had him as a foster child since he was one, coming to us all dirty and hungry. At the last visit, it was obvious the mom had been drinking. Why does the Department think that woman has cleaned up her act?**

.....  
**— Foster parent**  
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**I have so many visits to supervise in my caseload. And I get so mad when the birth mom doesn't show up, or worse, she shows up and the foster mom is rude to her. I see how happy the kids are to see their moms, and I realize this is the point. But it's hard.**

**— Case manager**  
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## Protocol Needed

**Lynne Katz, EdD** Director, Linda Ray  
Intervention Center, University of Miami



Co-parenting can conjure up some worrisome thoughts for foster parents. For some, it can bring up pictures of birth parents roaming the streets looking for their children's current placement address. In these moments, the foster parents envision a threat, not a partnership built around the child needing

care. Much of the confusion comes from long-held beliefs about child welfare or just the tremendous variation in how co-parenting is interpreted within child welfare and across the different agencies. For instance, is transportation the case manager's job or the foster parent's? Do the foster parents take the child to a doctor's appointment? Can the biological parent go along? Do the foster parent and biological family work together to transition the child towards reunification?

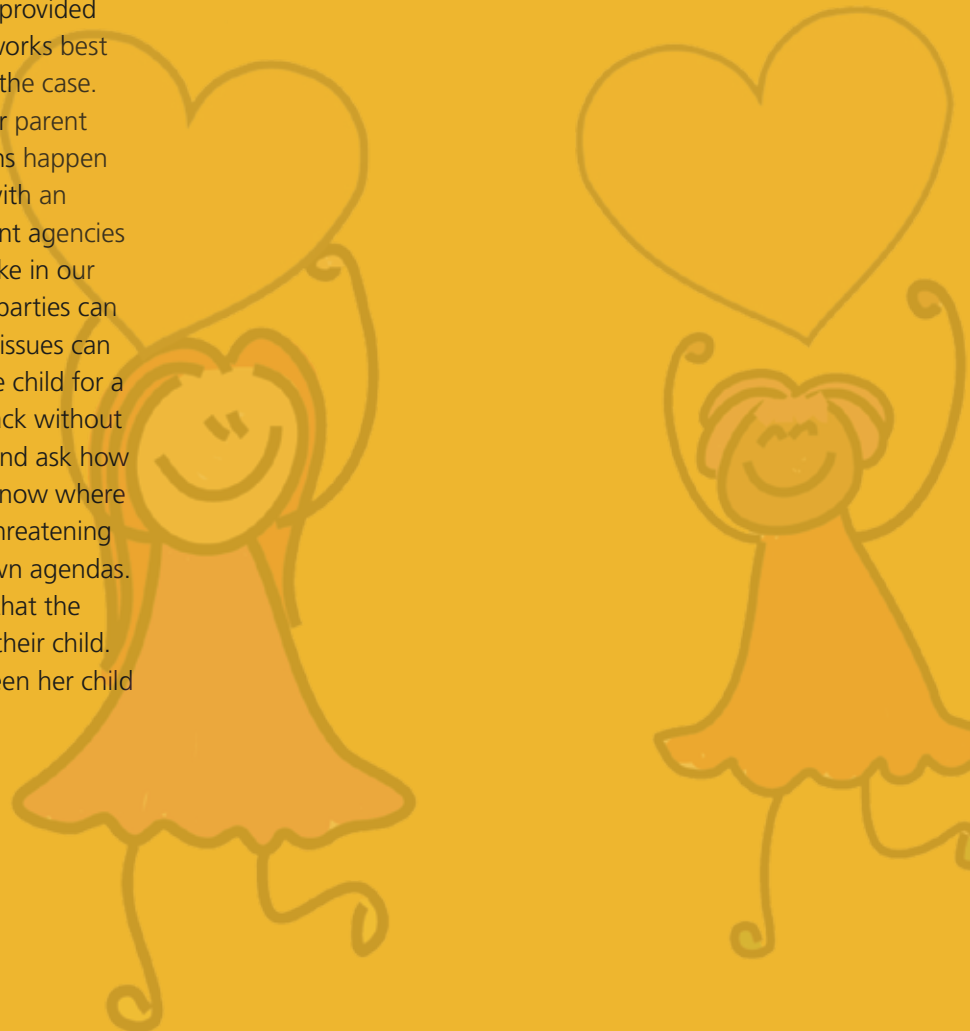
Perhaps the child has had frequent visits with the parent, but hasn't seen the new home where she will live once reunified. Can the foster and birth parent take the child together for a visit assuring the child that the move is validated by both? Moving from the foster parent, who has provided transitional security, back to the biological mom, works best when both families come together over the life of the case.

I'm wary of systems that leave it up to the foster parent and birth parent to make these kinds of interactions happen without a protocol in place. We should come up with an agreement beforehand so that all case management agencies reach consensus about what co-parenting looks like in our community and how it is to be implemented. The parties can agree how they will interact. That way, even small issues can be resolved. For example, a foster parent sends the child for a sleepover with her mom and the toddler comes back without her new pajamas. Why can't the foster mom call and ask how the visit went with mom and by the way, do you know where the pajamas are? That would be a practical, non-threatening solution. However, both families may have their own agendas. Deep down the foster parents may be concerned that the parent is getting better and will be reunified with their child. The parent, in turn, worries about the bond between her child and the foster parent.

Transitional plans involving both sets of family members need to be thought out and explained at the beginning of the out-of-home placement rather than at the time of reunification. We had a little boy, for example, who was going back home. We asked the foster mom to bring him to our Center for a therapy session with some of his toys and things, and to be in the room with the biological mom and play together, showing him that it was alright to be with both adults.

Intellectually it made sense to the foster mom to participate in the transition. But she arrived with him and all of his personal belongings and she said, "I can't do this." She was crying. The birth mom was a stranger to her and she had not received any transition training from her agency prior to this meeting. She was unprepared to deal with that pull and tug. With protocols, these situations can be avoided.

And even if reunification with the birth family does not happen, the co-parenting process during the life of the case can be critical. I've seen a dad who had the opportunity to get to know the family adopting his child. When he came into the courtroom he said "I know you're going to take good care of my son even though I can't." He had a concrete understanding of who the adopted parents would be, which was far better than where his imagination could lead him.



## From the Executive Director

# Our Issue on Co-Parenting



Over our twenty plus years, more than 40,000 volunteers have dedicated their time to thorough case review and advocacy for children in the foster care system. Our trained citizens review panel members monitor the performance

of the child welfare community in providing effective case management and services. They also identify issues facing the children in care and advocate for systems change to improve permanency outcomes.

Our volunteers were asking questions about foster parents: What are foster parents required to do? Why aren't they helping more with visitation? In July of 2009, we responded with a workshop for them, and others, funded by The Children's Trust.

The workshop focused on the special importance of having foster parents who can work in "partnership" with the birth parents. While this partnership is important to all children, it is especially critical for the emotional development of very young children. Learning that co-parenting was actually the expected practice in our local child welfare system came as a surprise to many in attendance.

This newsletter on co-parenting is a response to requests from our volunteers and others for more information on this topic. It is our belief that through continued discussion, education and advocacy we can help in efforts to establish permanent homes for the foster children in our community.

We commend all of you—our panel members and others—for the hard work you do to improve the child welfare system.

We are grateful for the continued support from our funders, the judicial system and the community. If you are interested in becoming a citizen review panel volunteer or in making a financial contribution to support our work, contact us at 305-573-6665 or at [info@fostercarereview.org](mailto:info@fostercarereview.org).

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**We will be scheduling a workshop on co-parenting for the near future.**

Please check our website or call us for more information.

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