



Preserving Connections

Helping Children and Youth
Develop and Maintain Connections

Preserving Connections...

Far too often, young people who enter the child welfare system are forced to leave behind everything that has become important, including the connections they have spent their entire lives developing. Yet those connections will always hold fundamental places in their lives.

Consider the following questions:



- Can you call and ask someone what you were like as a baby?
- Is there someone in your life who can tell you about your grandparents?
- What did it feel like to be part of a specific neighborhood while you were growing up?

When children move from their homes to foster care, they may lose touch with the people who hold the memories of when they first walked and talked, the pictures of how they looked when they were born, and the rituals or traditions that became important to them. These children struggle to remain connected to their past. Some youth have been in foster care for many years and have had multiple foster placements. When they move from one foster home to another, they again risk losing people with whom they have shared memories and built connections.

This experience can be traumatic to children who may already be struggling with the aftermath of having survived abuse and neglect and losing family members, while simultaneously facing the daily challenges of growing up. Children develop a sense of disconnect, often feeling confused, lost and responsible for the situation they are facing.

This booklet addresses some ways – including open adoptions – to preserve and build connections for children and youth. It was written to support all those who work with foster youth to think creatively about how to maintain connections for children; how to help them preserve their life stories; how to ensure that they heal and grow in loving and connected environments; and how to help them have proud connections to their past.

An Emerging Concept

The concept of preserving connections can be illustrated with an image of a potted plant. If you take a plant out of its pot, it is automatically in crisis, searching for stability and safety. In the same vein, when a child is removed from home, he or she can feel confused, uprooted, and shaken. Children in these situations often feel a sense of disconnect from their parents; a loss of extended family members (siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents); friends from the neighborhood, classmates and teachers; and separation from their religious affiliations and cultural ties. It is as if the child's roots have been cut off.



If we expect children to thrive in new environments, we must do our best to transplant with care, maintain connections, and when possible provide opportunities to reestablish roots in positive and meaningful ways.

What Connections Should Be Preserved?

Depending on the child's circumstances and best interests, efforts should be made while the child is in foster care and after he/she leaves foster care to preserve connections with:

- Parents
- Siblings
- Other relatives, including grandparents
- Foster families
- School
- Friends
- Culture, religion, and community

Preserving Connections for Children & Youth in Foster Care

Birth Parents: While it is not always possible or in the child's best interest to preserve connections with the birth parents, research shows that when children have information about and access to their birth parents, it helps alleviate a sense of loss and assists with the grieving process.

What can be done to preserve connections with birth parents?

- Whenever possible, choose placements for foster children in close proximity to the child's birth parents.
- Encourage visitation and communication, even if the parent is incarcerated.
- Encourage parents to participate in treatment planning, mediation, and court hearings and related events.
- Consider open adoptions. (See pages 7 - 9 for more information on open adoptions.)
- Promote positive relationships between foster youth and birth parents; avoid speaking negatively about birth parents in front of the foster youth.
- Keep foster youth informed of what is going on with his or her parents; always be honest.



Siblings: Emotional bonds between siblings are incredibly powerful. Research indicates that children who are placed with or have close connections to their siblings while in foster care have fewer emotional and behavioral problems.

What can be done to preserve connections with siblings?

- Whenever possible, place siblings together in foster homes.
- Specifically address maintaining connections with siblings in case planning.
- Encourage visitation and communication.
- Keep foster youth informed of what is going on with his or her siblings; always be honest.
- If siblings have to be separated initially, work toward reuniting them.

Grandparents and Other Relatives: Grandparents and other extended family members play an important role in the lives of many children. In some cases, grandparents may be the primary caregivers or heavily involved in the child's life before they are taken into custody. Recently, lawmakers have written policies that recognize the specific rights of grandparents with their grandchildren.

What can be done to preserve connections with family members?

- Specifically address maintaining connections with grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other extended family in case planning whenever possible.
- Encourage and support visitation.
- Inform grandparents of their rights, including their right to visitation. (For more information, see the booklet *Abuelos y Sus Nietos: Grandparents & Their Grandchildren*. Call Pegasus Legal Services for Children, 505-244-1101, or the Administrative Office of the Courts, 505-827-4800, and ask for a copy.)
- Keep foster youth informed of what is going on with his or her extended family; always be honest.

Foster Families: Former foster families often develop unique bonds with children that can be extremely valuable and long-lasting.

What can be done to preserve connections with former foster parents?

- When possible, encourage and support foster families to maintain contact with children who have been placed in their home.
- Make sure foster parents know they have the right to attend and be heard at many of the court hearings in the case; encourage them to do so.
- Help develop comprehensive transition plans that include an exchange of phone numbers between the prior foster family and the child's next placement.

Here's a suggestion...

Encourage young people to keep a life book with the names, contact information (when available), and photos of important people in their lives. Their life books could include family, friends, classmates, mentors, social workers, foster families, and others.

School Connections: Maintaining school connections involves keeping young people in school, limiting the number of changes in school placements, and allowing foster youth to have access to peer groups and activities at school that all young people enjoy. Additionally, young people benefit enormously from the consistent support of teachers, administrators and principals at school.

What can be done to preserve school connections?

- Whenever possible, keep young people in a consistent school placement.
- Avoid school changes in the middle of the school year. If it is necessary to change placement and/or school, help the youth stay in touch with friends and classmates from the school they left.
- Help foster youth to participate in extracurricular school activities.
- Support the building of friendships and peer support.

Cultural Connections: Maintaining cultural connections for young people is essential to developing a clear sense of identity, self-esteem and pride. Foster parents, advocates and others who work with children must demonstrate understanding, compassion, and cultural competence.

What can be done to preserve cultural connections?

- Help children maintain a connection to their language of origin.
- Make books available about the child's culture of origin; ensure that the child spends time with people who share his/her culture of origin.
- Attend and acknowledge various celebrations and events within the child's culture of origin.
- Learn about the child's cultural background and speak freely with the child about cultural issues.
- Respect the young person's choice of religious affiliation and help him/her participate accordingly.

In accordance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), Native American youth in foster care must be placed in accordance with tribal placement preferences, if identified, or, if not identified by the tribe, to placements in the following order: extended family, foster home licensed by the tribe, Indian foster home licensed by the state, institution approved by the tribe, non-Indian foster home licensed by the state.

Open Adoptions

Open adoption is allowing post-adoption contact between the child and his/her birth family and is now a recognized best practice nationwide. It has become increasingly clear that almost every child freed for adoption stands to benefit from an open adoption. Open adoption can minimize a child's sense of loss, ease feelings of abandonment, and have a positive impact on a child's sense of self-worth.

The New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD) is participating fully in this movement, requiring consideration of open adoption as part of the decision-making when a child's plan is changed to adoption. In many situations, social workers are immediately recruiting for a concurrent or adoptive family who is accepting of openness.

In many areas of the state CYFD is also using mediators to facilitate Post-Adoption Contact Agreements (PACAs) between the adoptive parents, the adopted child, and the birth family. The PACA, which is incorporated into the adoption decree, spells out the nature of communication and contact after an adoption has finalized. The level of openness is always decided on a case-by-case basis by the families and individuals involved and may include birth parents, siblings and/or grandparents. Contact and communication in open adoptions can range from infrequent exchanges of letters and pictures to regular visits between families.



Common Misconceptions about Open Adoption

MISCONCEPTION	WHAT RESEARCH SAYS
Children are confused about who their “real” parents are.	Children in open adoptions are not confused about who their parents are. They understand the different roles of adoptive and birth parents in their lives.
Open adoption limits the ability of adoptive parents to fully parent, bond, discipline or engage in the lives of their adopted child.	Open adoption does not interfere with the adoptive parents’ sense of entitlement or their sense that they have the right to parent or discipline their adopted child.
Adoptive parents in open adoptions feel less control of situations in their child’s life and are confused as to their role with their adoptive child.	Adoptive parents <i>do</i> have a clear sense of their parenting role and responsibilities. Adoptive parents in open adoptions feel in control and more able to deal with situations in their child’s life.
Children in open adoptions are unable to connect or develop attachments to the adoptive parents/family.	Children can integrate adoptive parents and birth parents into their lives in a healthy manner. This integration helps to minimize loss, preserve significant birth family connections, and increase the attachment to the adoptive family.
Open adoptions are complicated, difficult, and require too much energy.	Most families report that preserving connections for children is easy and natural. There is no secrecy, no shame, and no unanswered questions for children. Adoptive parents and children have a greater sense of permanence and peace in their relationship when the adoption is open.

Frequently Asked Questions About Open Adoptions:

At what point should open adoption be considered for a child?

Open adoption should always be considered as soon as it becomes clear that adoption is a likely permanency plan for a child. Post-adoption contact with various members of the birth family is appropriate for almost all children. The level of openness appropriate for a child and his/her birth family should be considered during the discussions to change a child's permanency plan to adoption.

When should open adoption be brought up as an option to birth parents?

As soon as there is an identified adoptive family for their child, birth parents should be approached about the possibility of open adoption. This can be done prior to formal relinquishment counseling, with additional information provided during relinquishment counseling. Articles and sample post-adoption contact agreements can be shared with the birth parents to give them more information about the process and benefits of open adoption.

When should open adoption be brought up as an option to adoptive families?

If applicable in their case, the potential adoptive family should be approached and educated about the benefits of open adoption immediately. Articles and sample PACAs can be shared with the adoptive family to provide more information about the process.

All parties want to pursue open adoption! What happens next?

In most cases, formal legally binding agreements (PACAs) will be part of the adoption decree. Every situation requires special considerations and negotiations. Mediators will work with families to develop these agreements and CYFD workers and CASAs can help navigate this important process.

Building Connections

Unfortunately, there are young people who will leave the foster care system with no connection to their birth families and very few other enduring connections. It is these important connections that would have served as support networks for young people, providing continuity in their lives and helping them to access programs, education, and other services that promote their development. When these connections are absent, it becomes necessary to assist young people in building them.

Building and maintaining connections for youth transitioning out of care will help them plan for and address the educational, health and mental health, employment, and housing needs they may face when they leave foster care. In order to make that transition successfully, all young people need:

- positive connections - especially with family, peer groups, schools, communities, and cultures.
- mentors - adults to provide personal and emotional support to young people, whether members of the youth's extended family or other adults.
- resilience - the capacity for adapting to change and stressful events in healthy and flexible ways.
- self-determination - the ability to think for oneself and take action consistent with one's choices.
- a positive belief in the future, hope and optimism - the belief that one can achieve one's desired goals.
- a clear and positive identity and sense of self.

One way to build connections for children in foster care is to actively identify all adults in the youth's *natural network* of relationships (for example, teachers, coaches, employers, former foster parents, mentors, social workers, faith based relationships, CASAs and GALs). Look for adults who are interested in participating in a young person's life. These adults can also assist older youth in transition planning. Adults who are interested in maintaining connections will be able to assist and support the young person to achieve his/her future goals, have a sense of constancy, and feelings of love and value.

Ways to Build Connections with Youth

If you reflect on your own childhood, you may remember someone from your own life that you connected with, someone you could trust and turn to for support and encouragement, and someone who made you feel special. Relationships that are built with social workers, Guardians ad Litem, Youth Attorneys, CASAs, foster parents, and teachers are natural connections that could be nurtured with young people. The benefits of maintaining connections and building relationships with young people can last a lifetime!

- **Phone calls, emails and visits** - Maintaining connections with children can be as simple as a phone call on birthdays and occasional emails, or as involved as periodic visits and regular involvement.
- **Asking good questions** – You may be amazed how easy it is to support young people by asking good questions and showing that you are interested in their lives.
- **Mentoring** - Mentoring is the presence of caring individuals who, formally or informally, provide young people with support, advice, friendship, reinforcement and constructive examples. A mentor is a caring adult friend or peer who devotes time to a young person.

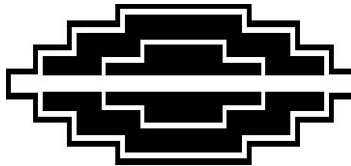
Other ways to support young people:

- Support education by helping students stay motivated and focused.
- Provide positive ways and ideas for young people to spend free time.
- Help young people face daily obstacles.
- Help develop career and economic skills necessary for transitioning out of care.

This booklet is about the importance of building and preserving connections for children and young people in foster care and beyond. All of us need to think creatively about how to do this – how to help our foster youth preserve their life stories, how to develop proud connections to their histories, and how to ensure that they heal and grow in loving and connected environments.

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