

Supporting relationships between birth and foster families

CHAMPS, which stands for Children Need Amazing Parents, is a policy campaign focused nationally and in states to promote high quality foster parenting. CHAMPS is based on the understanding that all children need and do best in families. Foster parents, including kinship caregivers, play a primary role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. In fact, stable, quality foster parenting is one of the most powerful ways we can help children in foster care to heal and thrive. It is associated with a range of better outcomes for children, such as greater success in school, healthy relationships with family, and improved health and safety.

The CHAMPS policy playbook highlights six priorities for policy change, including supporting relationships between birth and foster families.

Why is it important to support relationships between birth and foster families?

Most children who enter foster care return to their families. Supporting birth and foster family relationships can minimize the trauma experienced by children when they are removed from home. It also preserves and nurtures the child's relationship with birth parents, siblings and extended family; and can provide birth parents with mentoring and support to improve their parenting skills. In the end, these relationships facilitate reunification and can prevent re-entry to out-of-home care.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Children who had at least weekly contact with their biological parents demonstrated the lowest levels of depression and externalizing problems compared to children with less frequent contact with their biological parents.¹
- Where reunification is the goal, young children with more consistent and frequent contact with their biological parents have more secure attachments and are better adjusted than children who have less frequent contact.²
- Foster parents' sensitivity, empathy, and values of accepting birth families made contacts with birth families more successful and supported the child in maintaining a sense of belonging to both families.³
- The quality of parent-to-parent relationship between birth and foster parents increased positive discipline approaches and decreased harsh discipline.⁴

¹ McWey, L.M., Acock, A., & Porter, B. (2010). The impact of continued contact with biological parents upon the mental health of children in foster care. *Child and Youth Services Review, 32*(10), 1338-1345.

² McWey, L.M. & Mullins, A.K. (2004). Improving the lives of children in foster care: The impact of supervised visitation. *Family Relations, 53*(3), 293-300.

³ Neil E., Beek M., & Schofield G. (2003). Thinking about and managing contact in permanent placements: The differences and similarities between adoptive parents and foster caregivers. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 8*, 401-418.

⁴ Linares, L. O., Montalto, D., Rosbruch, N., & Li, M. (2006). Discipline practices among biological and foster parents. *Child Maltreatment, 11*, 157-167.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Through policy and supportive practice, we can promote birth and foster family relationships.

- **Implement shared parenting policies** that support birth and the foster parents working together as partners. Shared parenting incorporates an understanding of trauma and resilience and often includes practices such as comfort calls and icebreaker meetings.
- **Intentionally recruit foster parents who are interested in mentoring and coaching birth families.** With half of the children in foster care returning home, it is important to recruit foster parents that will partner with birth parents when reunification is the permanency goal.
- **Clarify what information about the child—such as health and education records—needs to be shared with the foster parent.** The more the foster parent knows about the child, the better equipped she or he will be to establish a child-centered relationship with the birth parent.
- **Train caseworkers on supporting birth and foster parent relationships, especially when a child is placed with kin.** Caseworkers need specialized training on how to help caregivers and birth parents manage their relationships for the benefit of the child. When a child is placed with a family member, there are often pre-existing relationships which present unique issues, strengths and challenges for which caseworkers need to be prepared.
- **Train caseworkers on supporting birth and foster family involvement for youth in congregate and residential settings,** including participation in the youth's treatment program, facilitating outreach to birth families and relatives, and supporting family-based aftercare supports.

TAKING ACTION

CHAMPS calls on child welfare agencies, legislators and other decision makers to support birth and foster family relationships. Suggestions for getting started:

- **Agency and program leaders** can examine existing policies and practices for how the agency supports or hinders relationships between birth and foster parents. Invite foster parents, including kinship caregivers, and birth parents to help review policies and discuss improvements. Be sure to examine parent and caseworker trainings, visitation policies and recruitment messaging.
- **Legislators** can hold hearings to learn more about existing state and county policies and identify gaps and opportunities. In addition to inviting agency leaders, national experts can be invited to share information about national trends and best practices.
- **Advocates, families and community leaders** can raise awareness of challenges and opportunities in their states by hosting a community forum which includes birth, foster and kinship families and youth that have experienced foster care. Invite public officials to provide them the opportunity to learn about what's working as well as what challenges exist.

CHAMPS RESOURCES

- **For more information on CHAMPS,** go to www.fosteringchamps.org
- **For administrative and legislative policy examples** related to supporting birth and foster parent relationships, check out the CHAMPS policy playbook at <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org>
- **Learn more about CHAMPS technical assistance options** at <http://fosteringchamps.org/champs-technical-assistance/>
- **Contact CHAMPS** at info@fosteringchamps.org