



At the national, state and local levels, there is increasing recognition of the importance of family relationships to ensure the success and well-being of children. Involving family can help prevent children from entering foster care. Family involvement can increase the likelihood that children who are removed from their parents live with someone they know. Family can also be encouraged to support children while they are in state custody and beyond-when children return home, gain new permanent family connections or age out of foster care.

Balancing placement, ongoing family relationships and confidentiality

In accordance with the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, child welfare agencies are required to provide written notification to grandparents and all other adult relatives when a child requires out-of-home placement. The purpose of contact is to discuss a range of placement and support options that they might provide the child. The intent goes well beyond concerns for placement. Family Search and Engagement should begin at the earliest stage of child welfare involvement and should be continuously promoted to establish placement options and preserve continuity of family relationships and lifelong connections for children.

The following guidance is provided to assist staff in balancing the agencies mandates for confidentiality and the child's rights and needs for family connectedness.

When reaching out to absent parents or relatives:

- Begin by divulging only enough information necessary to identify the relative relationship, establish rapport and assess interest in playing a supportive role for a child.
- Look for basic family information, such as the family size, who is included in the family, which family members are or are not safe for a child and who in the family may have information that could help you understand the youth's past or plan for youth's future.

DO

- State that a child is in (or in need of) foster care or out of home placement and that all efforts are being made to ensure the youth's safety
- Disclose the child and/or parent's name in order to establish a relationship
- Provide general information about the child to help establish a connection. Share information about the child's strengths, interests, favorite subjects in school, special skills or unique qualities. For example, note that "Johnny is a bright kid who excels in math" or "an outstanding athlete" or "is interested in learning more about his family."

- Let family members know if the child has mentioned them specifically. Tell them, Suzy has mentioned you as someone “who is important to her” or “helpful to her” or “someone she has fond memories of.” Nothing beats the relationship connection!
- If asked to provide additional information about the parent or child that you are not comfortable with, let them know that there is some information that you cannot share with them at this time. You can say that often youth who come into foster care need help dealing with difficult issues and that the youth will get the support he/she needs. Indicate that more information will be provided to those adults who will plan for and support the child.
- Describe the importance of family connections for all children.
- Emphasize a variety of ways family members might support the child. For example, they could provide the child with information about the family and the past. They could share family photos or stories. They could offer concrete and tangible supports, help the child plan for his or her future, provide emotional support through visits, letters or phone calls, or consider becoming a placement resource.
- Provide family members with contact information for the assigned caseworker and supervisor.
- Document any and all information from the conversation, including:
 - The name, address, phone and email of the person you speak with;
 - Information about his or her relationship to the child or family;
 - Any details about family history or genealogy, including any stories shared about the child;
 - Information about the person’s expressed interest in the child and details of possible roles the person could play in the child’s life;
 - The names and contact information for any additional relatives;
 - The date of the conversation; and
 - Any next steps the agency or family member will take.

DON'T

- Disclose information about the child’s location, including information about the foster home, the identity of the foster parents, or the location of the school or residential facility.
- Disclose information about why the family came to the attention of the child welfare agency, including information about initial allegations, reasons for out-of-home placement, or the mental or physical health diagnoses of the child or parent.
- Share information you have learned from other family members or third parties.
- Make any promises. Background checks and ongoing safety assessments need to be done.

After individual family members become more involved and participate in planning discussions about the child, releases can be obtained that allow information to be shared incrementally. Collaborative planning between professionals and family members will, over time, provide sufficient information about a child’s specific needs to allow them to decide on the role and relationship they want to have with the child.