



Are you preparing to work with foster parents on Family Search and Engagement (FSE) activities? They are likely to have a lot of questions. Here are some answers. (Note: *There are no perfect, “right” answers!* Answers may depend on your agency’s practices and resources, the birth and foster families’ strengths and needs, and the child’s strengths and needs). That’s why several of these questions have multiple answers. Choose one or a combination and adapt it to suit the situation.

Remember, in talking with foster parents about FSE, your job is to:

- *Be encouraging and enthusiastic—foster families will take your lead*
- *Be real and truthful—this is not an easy task*
- *Help them understand what to anticipate*
- *Provide best practice information and national statistics*

Q: What is FSE? Why now?

A: Family Search and Engagement is a practice that identifies and locates family members, community members and others who are significant to children in foster care. FSE includes establishing or re-establishing relationships between the child and significant adults in their lives. These adults can play a variety of roles for a child, such as providing information on the child’s past, planning for the future, building a network of support for the child and serving as potential placements.

Today, many public child welfare agencies and jurisdictions are focused on improving how they work with children and families. They want to learn from best practices in the field. Family Search and Engagement is one of those practices. Often used for children and youth who have been in care for long periods of time, FSE is equally important throughout the life of a case—from child welfare entry to exit.

Q: We’ve worked so hard to manage this child’s behavior and he (or she) is finally stable. Won’t FSE stir things up and cause an increase in poor behavior?

Some potential answers:

A: There may be some increase in poor behavior in the beginning, but typically, children’s behavior improves over time with FSE. As children begin to make sense of their past, they experience greater stability. This is because they have answers to their questions and a greater understanding of who the important adults are in their lives and what they might expect from these adults. In our experience, FSE work increases children’s stability over the long term.

A: If we keep children from pursuing relationships that they deem important, we are likely to see *more* negative behavior, defiance and acting out over time. Likewise, by failing to help children work on their relationships, we may unintentionally encourage them to connect with people in a secretive manner, without our knowledge.

A: It is normal to worry. But you should know that our experience and research both show that family involvement can help a child adjust to foster care and significantly mitigate loss and distress the child feels.

Q: Won't family members just continue to disappoint the child?

A: That's hard to say—and it is also where you and I come in. We can work with children to manage his or her expectations. FSE provides an opportunity for children to understand both the strengths and the limitations of adults who are important to them. It helps them gain a more realistic picture of what they can expect from these adults in the future—and do this while they have formal supports in place. Young people will make these connections with or without us! Let's help them do it safely and planfully.

Q: Aren't I putting myself and my family at risk by having contact with birth parents and extended family?

Some potential answers:

A: Safety is always the priority. The agency will not give out any identifying information without your permission.

A: Contact with family members may feel awkward or uncomfortable or even scary at first. But you will not be doing this on your own. I and other agency professionals will be there to make initial connections, help solidify relationships, and support you, the foster parents, and the child every step of the way.

A: Meeting the family gives the agency, you and the child a much more realistic look at how individual family members are doing and their individual strengths and limitations. The first step is for professionals to reach out and assess the situation. Then, together with you, the agency will determine which family members are OK for a child to meet and what level of connection will be safe and meaningful for the child.

A: The unknown we imagine is usually much worse than the reality. Once adults who care about a child come together, they recognize that what they have in common is a concern for the best interests of the child.

A: Reconnection work does not always involve birth parents. It may involve extended family members, siblings or former caregivers—people who have not been abusive or neglectful at all.

Q: What does this FSE work mean for my role with the child?

Some potential answers:

A: We are not talking about the child leaving your home. We are not planning for the child to go back to live with birth family. Rather, FSE helps children make sense of their past, so they can understand the present and plan for the future. FSE often expands the child's network of supportive adults, which helps them feel confident they have people in their lives they can rely on today and in the future.

A: While the child may need to live outside his or her birth family to ensure physical safety, maintaining continuity in important family relationships helps to lessen the divided loyalties that can undermine children's sense of stability; it can help ensure children's emotional security and well-being.

A: I want to reassure you—you will not be displaced. Children do not need to lose current family connections in order to re-connect with people whom they have loved and lost.

A: Just as you and your own children have multiple loving, supportive family relationships and adult connections, this child needs multiple, long-term relationships with people who care, beyond those who are paid to be in their lives.

Q: What specifically are you asking me to do?

Some potential answers:

A: I am asking you to consider what you can do to meet this child's specific needs. This may include one or more of the following:

- Support contact with this child's birth family and relatives in a safe and meaningful way. This might include contact by phone, letter, or social networking or it might include visits.
- Give permission for the youth to talk about their past, by being open to conversation about family history and important relationships.
- Provide transportation to or host a visit with a sibling or relative.
- Help a child construct a life book.
- Be patient with the child's range of feelings and behaviors related to the family reconnection process.
- Include the child in conversations about his or her future in your home and your intentions related to permanency. Make it clear what they can expect from you.

A: You are an essential member of the child's planning team and your voice is important. You as a caregiver know this young person best and can provide valuable information and insight. We can't do this without you!

A: Whether he or she shows it or not, this child will be looking to see if you are comfortable or threatened by this process. Your permission and support will go a long way to lessen the child's anxieties. This process has a much greater chance of success with your support!

Q: Why is FSE so important?

Some potential answers:

A: FSE can reduce trauma. When children are removed from parents or family because of abuse or neglect, they lose not only the negative aspects of those relationships but also the good, positive, comforting and familiar aspects. They also lose other sibling and family connections, which may have not been harmful. Just as abuse or neglect experiences are traumatic; these relational losses may be traumatic.

A: Family is important to everybody. Just as your family is important to you, children's families are important to them. Regardless of the circumstances under which they left

their families, there is a universal need to be connected and to know what happened to their family members.

A: Many of the children I know are making these connections on their own, through Facebook and other social networking, without any guidance or support.

Would you be surprised to know that, whether the agency or foster parents support it or not, children are seeking out family members upon leaving foster care? In fact:

- A large majority of young adults report being in regular contact with their birth family after leaving foster care.
- 81 percent reported having contact with a birth family member at least once a week. A third are in touch with their siblings. Twenty-three percent are in contact with their mothers, 15 percent their grandparents and 12 percent their fathers.
- In one study, 21 percent had returned to live with a birth parent at some point since leaving foster care, compared to only 4 percent who returned to live with a former foster parent at any point in time.

A: Outcomes for children who exit foster care without permanent family relationships and supportive adult connections are extremely poor. That's why they need our help finding and rebuilding those relationships.

What happens when children formerly in foster care do not have those relationships to support them in adulthood? Did you know that, of kids who age out of foster care without family connections:

- Just 58 percent will graduate high school by age 19, compared to 87 percent nationally
- Fewer than 3 percent will earn a college degree by age 25, compared to 28 percent nationally
- More than 1 in 5 will be homeless after age 18
- Nearly 80 percent will not earn enough to be self-supporting
- One in four will be incarcerated within two years of leaving foster care
- By age 21, nearly 71 percent of the young women will report having been pregnant at least once; 62 percent will have been pregnant more than once
- Half of 21-year-old men aging will have gotten someone pregnant, compared to 19 percent of peers who were not in foster care

What will it take to make you a Family Search and Engagement partner?

What do you need from me or others to be comfortable with this reconnection process?

Would it be helpful to talk with foster parents who are comfortable with this process and who have experience working with birth or extended family?