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POSITIVE INTERACTIONS WITH BIRTHPARENTS AS A FOSTER PARENT

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Like 51



With eleven foster kids over the last seven years, we have had many opportunities to interact with the birthparents of the kids we're caring for. We've experienced positive instances as well as not-so positive. Here are some of my thoughts from what we've learned.

During the foster placement:

- Settings in which you may have contact with the birthparents of your foster children would be at scheduled, supervised, court-ordered visitations (during drop-off / pick-up), and at court appearances.
- You will probably feel awkward when you're around the birthparents of the children you're fostering, not only the first time but maybe even throughout the case. Remember that meeting you is arguably even more awkward and emotional for them. You're caring for THEIR children. You know personal information about them. They may automatically feel defensive about you regardless of who you are and anything you can say or do. Be as compassionate as possible so to ensure the birthparents that their children are in a safe, positive environment.
- In that vein, be as positive as you can when speaking about the child, his or her welfare and progress, activities in which he/she is involved, without sounding like you're tooting your own horn, so to speak, or comparing your life and theirs. Nobody in this world has it all together. Give plain facts and be communicative in a healthy way.
- There is no competition when it comes to foster care. Nobody "wins" when a child has been removed from his or her home or origin, no matter what decisions are made at the end, no matter what "side" you may be on. Forget those words "win" and "keep" or "lose", and forget the phrase "on our side". The children are what matters. This is incredibly difficult to live out day to day, especially when, like us, you are a foster-adopt home and are hoping and praying for an outcome in which you adopt the children.

- Be respectful about personal information you know regarding the family's situation and past. Do not bring negative things up about the birthparents themselves to them or in court in front of them.
- Deep down, everyone - birthparents, foster parents, caseworkers, lawyers - just wants the best for the kids. Keep that in mind, and put the best possible spin on anything that's said and done. Don't jump to conclusions or be easy to offend.
- Do your best, be the best parent you can be, and don't get caught up in any negative feedback from the birthparents. Everyone parents differently, and that includes people who are parenting / have parented the same child. If the birthparents do something differently, be it shoe-tying, naptimes, diets, activities, etc., and they are concerned you don't do it the same way, listen and be respectful, but, as long as it is not a huge difference and the caseworkers support you, continue with what you're doing.
- If possible, share things from the children themselves. Sending along a picture, or a craft recently done by the child/ren can be a way to foster comfort in how the child is doing. It is also a nice gesture of goodwill.
- Don't be nosy and ask personal questions. Make pleasant small talk. You're not around to be "friends", but as part of a team that needs to cooperate and function appropriately.
- It's perfectly okay to remember that a court appearance is not a visitation for the birthparents. We have had experiences with feeling overwhelmed by spending long periods of time as one big "group", with the children stuck in the middle, without the benefit of a caseworker or lawyer to run interference or help with keeping things not awkward for all involved. If only for the fact that, if the children are there, it can be a horribly confusing and trying experience to be "caught" between two families is a good reason to discuss and set boundaries before a court date when the children are to be in attendance.
- Be safe and careful without being anxious and fearful. Keep identifying information to yourself and try not to share too much about your personal lives, hometown, neighborhood, etc., just to keep everyone comfortable and not create unnecessary risks.
- Along those lines, don't assume the worst. Don't become paranoid about every little interaction you have with the birthparents. There is a healthy way to have positive communication and still have boundaries. Discuss with the caseworkers if you ever have any concerns.
- Stay in touch with caseworkers and lawyers regarding the children and what's going on in their lives. If you're showing that you are caring for the children to the utmost of your abilities, are pleasant to deal with, and supportive of the children's future, it goes a long way for the caseworkers and lawyers to in turn support you when discussing the care of the children with the birthparents.
- Keep your comments regarding the birthparents positive around the foster children, both during care and when/if they are adopted. Whether their parents' rights are terminated or they are reunified together, they deserve to only hear you build up and never tear down. When the time comes to learn the truth about their life story, in age-appropriate stages, children will understand.

Relationships between foster parents and birthparents can develop into a great modeling situation for the children. When adults can rise above awkward circumstances to function in a positive manner, the children benefit and learn these skills as well.

If there are any tips out there from other foster parents that I should add, I would love to hear them!

[Volume 5 Issue 10 \(/issues/volume-5-issue-10\)](#)

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