



As a birth parent, my experience with the child welfare system was both challenging and transformative. It wasn't easy, and it gave me a deep understanding of what families go through. Now, I am a kinship caregiver to my niece and nephews and doing my best to provide them with the love and stability they need. This experience has made me even more passionate about family preservation and understanding the complex needs of children in foster care.

Seeing how difficult it can be for families in crisis, I decided to use my experiences to help others. I began working as a family advocate at Foster Kinship, an organization dedicated to supporting

kinship caregivers. This role opened my eyes to the struggles families face and gave me the tools to help guide and empower them.

Today, I'm proud to serve as the lead peer parent advocate for birth parents. In this role, I offer support, resources, and encouragement to those working to reunify with their children. I know how hard it can be, and I'm committed to helping others navigate this system in the best way possible.

On top of that, my daughter, who's had her own experiences in the system, is now the president of the youth advisory board. Seeing her grow into a leader in the community has been a source of pride, and it underscores the importance of empowering young people to be voices for change. All this fuels my drive to make a real difference for children and families and to create a system that supports, rather than punishes, those who need help the most.

Based on my experience, I have put together a list of 11 best practices for professionals supporting parents through their child welfare journey:

1. **Offer honest and compassionate counseling.** What I needed most was someone who would listen to me, without judgment. Knowing that I had a therapist who could help me make sense of things and who didn't rush me through decisions was a huge relief.
2. **Provide clear communication and information.** It's critical that birth parents are fully informed about their rights, the process, and what comes next. When people took the time to explain things in simple terms, I felt much more at ease. It made me feel like I had control over my situation, even if it was just a little bit.
3. **Respect our decisions and autonomy.** There were moments when I felt pressured by the system—like everyone around me had an idea of what was "best" for my children, but no one was listening to me.

4. **Provide ongoing emotional support.** I didn't expect the grief, guilt, and feelings of loss that came with my babies being in foster/kinship care. The emotional toll was heavy, but it helped to talk to someone who had been through a similar experience.
5. **Understand the importance of family and culture.** I come from a close-knit family, and strong cultural ties were important to me. I wanted to know that my kids would have respect for who they are and where they came from.
6. **Respect our privacy and confidentiality.** I knew there were legal and privacy issues that came with being involved in the child welfare system. I needed to trust that my personal information was being kept safe, especially when dealing with the emotional fallout.
7. **Offer financial and practical assistance.** I was a single mom struggling financially, and I needed help. When agencies aided with things like transportation, housing resources, or legal fees, it lifted a huge burden off my shoulders.
8. **Involve us in the decision-making process.** Even when I wasn't able to parent my children in the way I had hoped, I still wanted to be part of the process. It helped when I was given the chance to be involved in decisions about my children's future.
9. **Support the whole family, not just the parent.** When my family was included in conversations and offered support, it helped all of us understand the situation better.
10. **Encourage and facilitate postplacement contact.** I appreciated knowing that I could have updates on my children, even outside of the visitation days. It gave me some sense of relief.
11. **Be transparent and honest every step of the way.** One of the most important things I learned throughout my journey in the child welfare system was the power of transparency. Being told what was going on made me feel like I was being respected. For example, knowing exactly when a decision would be made or understanding the reasoning behind certain choices gave me peace of mind and allowed me to plan ahead.

The journey through the child welfare system is emotional, complicated, and sometimes downright heartbreaking. Professionals have an opportunity to create better practices that help birth parents heal, make informed decisions, and stay connected to their children when possible. My hope is that the system continues to evolve in ways that truly support us, not just as parents, but as people who have a deep love for our children.

If you or someone you know is going through this process, I hope this message helps. You're not alone.

With grace,

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

