

Reunification From Foster Care: A Guide for Parents

As a parent with a child in foster care, you may feel like your world changed overnight. You are suddenly involved in the child welfare and family court systems, and you don't know how long you and your child will be apart. Having your child removed from your home can be traumatic for you, your child, and the rest of your family.

Reunification—when a family is brought safely back together—is the most common goal for children and youth in foster care. It is also the most common result. Many parents have been reunited at home with their children, and so can you. At times, it may feel overwhelming. However, you are not alone. A team of people will support and guide you toward reunification with your child.

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This factsheet focuses on the steps that will help you navigate the child welfare system. It introduces the team that will work with you throughout the process and discusses your rights as a parent. It explains how you will work with your caseworker to make a plan for reunification (often called a case plan) and describes how partnering with your child's resource parent can help bring you and your family together again.

Terminology

In this factsheet, “foster care” may refer to any situation in which a child or youth is in the custody of a child welfare agency, whether he or she stays stay with relatives, in a licensed foster care home, or in a residential facility. Additionally, a “resource parent” could be a relative (i.e., kin), fictive kin (e.g., a close family friend), or someone neither you nor your child knows (i.e., a foster parent). For the rest of this factsheet, “resource parent” also includes your child's caseworker when he or she is in a residential treatment setting.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHILE YOUR CHILD IS IN FOSTER CARE

While your child is in foster care, you will complete steps toward reunification with the help of your team. Some of these steps include your participation in legal processes, such as court hearings. Other steps involve your completion of services that help you understand and address the safety concerns that led to your child entering foster care. Another step includes spending quality family time with your child while he or she is in out-of-home placement.

YOUR TEAM

Your team may consist of an attorney or lawyer, a caseworker, a resource parent, a parent partner, and others, such as service providers.

An attorney or lawyer can help if you need information or advice to address your legal concerns in and out of the courtroom. If you qualify for financial assistance, the court may assign an attorney to you. If you are not assigned an attorney and cannot afford one, a State or local legal aid office or the [Legal Services Corporation](#) may be able to help.

Your caseworker will create a case plan with your input to increase [protective factors](#) and reduce the need for out-of-home placement. A case plan outlines the actions required for the safe return of your child. (See the Your Case Plan section of this factsheet for more information.) Your caseworker will coordinate with your resource parent to stay informed about how your child adjusts to foster care or another living arrangement. Your caseworker will work collaboratively with you to develop a schedule for you and your child to spend quality time together.¹

¹ In some cases, family time may be restricted or denied, such as when a court order limits it or if there are substantial safety issues. If your family time has been restricted or denied, make sure you receive an explanation from your caseworker and discuss it with your attorney.

Your child's resource parent will support your family by providing care for your child until you are reunified. Resource parents are often open to building relationships with the parents of the child or youth they care for. (See the Building Relationships With Resource Parents section for more information.)

Your team may include a **parent partner** (also called a parent mentor, peer advocate, or parent navigator). Parent partners have experienced the child welfare system firsthand and reunified with their children, and they are trained to help parents experiencing family separation. Parent partners can help you navigate the child welfare system and support you in completing the steps required for the reunification process. Not all agencies work with parent partners. If you have not been assigned a parent partner, ask your caseworker and/or attorney if any are available and whether one can be assigned to assist you.

YOUR CHILD'S PLACEMENT

Your child may have been placed in the home of a family member or close friend (kinship care); with an unrelated resource family (foster care); or in an emergency shelter, group home, or other residential treatment setting (residential care). [Research](#) shows that children and youth who live with kin caregivers have fewer school and home changes and improved behavioral and mental health compared with children and youth who live with other types of caregivers. They also experience less [trauma](#) than children and youth in other kinds of care. You and your team should explore if kinship care is the right step for you and your child. (For more information about kinship care, read Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System](#).)

To decide what placement would be best for your child, agencies must think about many aspects of the child's life. Federal law encourages child welfare agencies to place children and youth in the least restrictive and most family-like setting and prioritize placing siblings together. Protecting your child's safety is critical. Still, child welfare professionals should also consider where families think their child would be most comfortable and where his or her needs will be best met. Agencies should consider factors such as your child's racial, ethnic, and cultural background; the caregiver's ability to care for your child; how close the caregiver's home is to your child's school; and whether your child will be able to keep a connection to his or her community.

COURT HEARINGS

Court hearings provide all legal parties the opportunity to state facts and evidence to assist a judge in making decisions about the progress of a case and whether and when a child or youth can safely return home. Depending on the State, most child welfare hearings are not criminal cases; the parents or guardians are not on trial. Even so, hearings can be intimidating and overwhelming during this time of crisis and family separation.

Some hearings focus only on progress toward reunification and how the child or youth is adjusting to out-of-home placement. See Types of Hearings in this section for more information about the kinds of hearings you may attend.

The following Information Gateway publications detail what to expect during court hearings and how to prepare for them:

- [*Understanding Child Welfare and the Courts*](#)
- [*Court Hearings for the Permanent Placement of Children*](#)

You may also want to ask your attorney or caseworker if mediation is an option if issues regarding reunification or other aspects of your case cannot be resolved or would be resolved more easily in a mediation setting.

Types of Hearings

Preliminary protective or shelter hearing: This occurs soon after your child has been removed from your home. Based on the information provided, the judge decides whether it is safe for you to have temporary custody of your child.

Adjudicatory hearing: This occurs shortly after the case is opened. The judge hears evidence from you, your lawyer, and the child welfare agency and then decides whether maltreatment occurred and if the court should remain involved in the case.

Dispositional hearing: This occurs shortly (sometimes immediately) after the adjudicatory hearing. The judge determines what the visitation plan will be and where to place your child while the case is ongoing. This hearing also determines the identified services that may help you and your child, and then the judge orders them.

Review hearing: This occurs at least every 6 months (more often, in some States). This hearing helps the judge determine whether the agency has offered you services that would support safe reunification with your child. The judge also checks on your child's well-being in foster care. (See the Your Case Plan section for more information.)

Permanency planning hearing: This is required to occur 12 months after a child or youth enters foster care and every 12 months thereafter, though jurisdictions may hold these hearings more frequently. The judge decides about the child or youth's permanent home and finalizes the permanency plan.

YOUR FAMILY'S RIGHTS WHILE INVOLVED WITH THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

All States must ensure the rights required by Federal law, including the following rights of families of children in foster care:

- Parents or caregivers suspected of child abuse or neglect have the right to be notified of the specific allegations against them and the results of the agency's investigation.
- So that children and youth are placed with relatives whenever possible, States are required to find and notify, within 30 days after a child or youth is removed from his or her home, all grandparents, all parents of a sibling of the child or youth, and other adult relatives (on both sides of the family), with exceptions due to family or domestic violence.
- States must try to place siblings together when possible. If siblings must be separated, they should have frequent visits or other ongoing interactions.
- Youth in foster care aged 14 years or older have the right to help develop their case plan and any revision to the plan. They may choose up to two people who are not resource parents or caseworkers to be a part of their case planning team.

You can find more information about foster care laws in your State (including parents' rights) using the [State Guides and Manuals search](#) on the Information Gateway website.

THE RIGHTS OF FATHERS

Fathers have the right to be involved in their child's life. They can positively affect their child's physical health, social and emotional development, and overall well-being. Fathers can play a critical role in their child's experience in the family reunification process, whether they are nonresidential (or, in other words, don't live with their child) or do not have custody. In addition to being considered a placement option, fathers can support reunification by helping with the following:

- Sharing information to help a caseworker find family members who may be able to provide kinship care
- Encouraging relatives to spend time with the child or youth
- Helping the child or youth's mother work toward reunification
- Providing the child or youth's caseworker with medical information or information about benefits that the child or youth may receive, such as health insurance, survivor benefits, or child support

[Fatherhood programs](#) provide information and resources for and about fathers. Many organizations can point fathers to fatherhood groups or programs where they can meet fathers who are in the same situation. [Finding Your Way: Guides for Fathers in Child Protection Cases](#), by the National Fatherhood Initiative, is a set of six guides that explain the court process. These guides clarify fathers' legal rights and responsibilities and how to exercise their rights within the child welfare and court systems. The guides also describe how to find and work with a lawyer and much more.

For information about resolving differences between you and the child welfare agency, refer to Information Gateway's [From Complaint to Resolution: Understanding the Child Welfare Grievance Process](#).

THE RIGHTS OF PARENTS WHO ARE INCARCERATED

Except under certain circumstances, parents who are incarcerated have the same rights as those who are not incarcerated when it comes to the following:

- Participation in regular visits and contact with their child
- Help with case planning and participation in court processes
- Reasonable efforts to support reunification

An incarcerated parent may need to advocate for quality family time with his or her child or other reunification efforts. Parents who are incarcerated should remind their caseworker of their role in their child's reunification. Visit the [National Reentry Resource Center website](#) for helpful information.

YOUR CASE PLAN

The case plan may be called a service plan, treatment plan, or reunification plan. **Your case plan is a road map for bringing your child home.** It outlines steps to help address the issues that brought your family to the child welfare system. The case plan is a written document developed by the caseworker and the parents or guardians of the child or youth in foster care. Information Gateway's [Case Planning for Families Involved With Child Welfare Agencies](#) provides information about what the case plan must include according to the laws in each State.

Your caseworker will support you in identifying and creating goals. He or she will also offer access to services to meet your goals and assist you in changing behaviors or other issues that may disrupt your child's safety at home, including providing services for your child. You should be informed of any changes to the plan and be able to review the plan regularly. Your caseworker will track progress toward achieving your case goals and close your case when the goals are completed successfully.

Concurrent Planning

While you work toward reunification with your child, your caseworker may identify a second permanency plan for your child, such as living permanently with a relative (guardianship), independent living (for an older teen), or adoption. Developing and working toward this additional goal is called “concurrent planning.” In general, your caseworker’s top priority is for your child to be reunified with you. Concurrent planning is an attempt to prepare for unforeseen situations when reunification isn’t possible for you and your child. Concurrent planning will be discussed in your case plan.

Your caseworker should meet with you to learn all he or she can about your family and partner with you to develop a plan for reunification. An open and trusting relationship between you and your caseworkers may help make your involvement with the child welfare system more positive.

Tell your caseworker what makes your child special and what help you need to maintain a safe home. Share the following information with your caseworker:

- Your strengths as a parent, including what you do well and what is special about your family
- Your natural and community supports, including who helps you and your child, such as neighbors, close friends, or family members
- Your child’s unique needs, including medical needs, school issues, and fears
- Your goals and dreams for your family and the supports you may need to achieve them
- Your family’s cultural beliefs and traditions

As you assist your caseworker in putting your case plan together, include as many people as possible who can support you, such as the following:

- Your child’s other parent and his or her relatives
- Other members of your family
- People from your child’s school, religious institution, or other organizations
- Close family friends
- Your child, if appropriate to his or her age and maturity

You may be expected to sign and follow this plan. Before you sign it, speak with your caseworker and attorney about anything that worries you or you don’t understand. You may also want to involve your and/or your child’s legal representation, such as a court-appointed special advocate, attorney, or guardian ad litem (GAL). **You have the right to be kept informed.** You should be told about any changes to the plan and review the plan regularly.

Supports and Services

Your case plan should include supports and services meant to help you maintain a safe home for your child. Among other things, these supports and services might include the following, if appropriate for your needs:

- Counseling (for you and/or your family)
- Drug or alcohol treatment
- Help with housing, transportation, food, and other concrete needs
- Assistance with building job skills and finding employment
- Anger management classes
- Parenting classes

It is your right to ask for services you believe you or your child need to improve the safety of your home and your child and family's well-being. Services should be arranged around your work schedule whenever possible. Do not settle for a service or program that will not help you reach reunification. If necessary, advocate for services that will be most helpful for you. If you can't afford the services in your case plan, ask your caseworker to refer you to community agencies. They can help or ask that your services be paid through a community services agency.



"I graduated from a year-long inpatient treatment program, started working full time, and doing all of the services that the court had ordered. Working a job, going to services, and working on self is extremely difficult. . . One by one, I was able to work down the list of required services. I went from noncompliant to partially compliant to compliant. . . Today I can attest to the power of faith, support, and love. My daughter and I are together. And she is a light brighter than anything that has touched my life."—Shrounda, Birth Parent National Network (BPNN), Washington

The following resources may help with your case planning decisions:

- [How the Child Welfare System Works](#)
- [Foster Care Bill of Rights](#)

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY FAMILY TIME

You have a right to and deserve quality time with your child during your family's separation.

Frequent, quality family time between a parent and his or her child—as well as the child's siblings, other family members, and friends—helps reduce the trauma of removal and out-of-home placement for children and youth. Meaningful family time supports healthy development and [attachments](#). It also reduces a child or youth's feelings of rejection, provides a sense of belonging, and decreases depression, worry, and problem behaviors. Quality family time with your child also has many [benefits](#) for parents, including improved motivation and self-worth.

Agencies differ in the environments they provide for quality family time, but they are required—except in extreme cases—to arrange time for parents and their child in foster care to spend quality time together. Meaningful family time may occur in your home, the agency, or other locations in the community. It may take place during "normal" family activities, such as sharing meals, attending medical appointments, and participating in school events.

The length and frequency of quality family time with your child depends on his or her age, needs, stage of development, and other factors. If you want longer or more frequent quality time with your child, discuss it with your caseworker and find out what steps need to occur for that to happen.

If your caseworker approves, your child's resource parent may be able to supervise visits outside the agency. Aside from helping with quality family time, seeing a genuine connection between you and the resource parent may help your child readjust when his or her time in foster care is over.

Virtual Family Time

If your caseworker and your child's resource parent support the idea, you may want to arrange [virtual family time](#), where you and your child communicate in real time via video. This may provide more opportunities to stay in touch with your child. A young child may be unable to participate in virtual family time on his or her own, so a resource parent, sibling, or someone else may need to assist on the child's end.

You should work with your caseworker—and your child's resource parent—to include virtual family time in your case plan and determine if the visits need to be supervised, if the resource parent is comfortable taking on that role, and other logistics. The age of the child may matter. For example, teens may video chat or text parents more often and require less supervision, depending on the case. Working these details into an individualized plan for your case could simplify the processes and help maintain regular calls with your child.

If you need help connecting on your end, you can ask the resource parent for help setting up calls with your child. Even if you and your caseworker or your child's resource parent have discussed how you will join the session and what to expect, you should always make sure there is a backup plan in case you experience technical issues (for example, you can't get a good connection or there is no sound).

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH RESOURCE PARENTS

Genuine connections take time to develop, but they are worth the effort. Building trust with your child's resource parent can benefit you and your child in many ways. For example, establishing open communication will help give you opportunities to provide the resource parent with information on your child's likes and dislikes, as you are the expert on your child.

The following are tips for working with your child's resource parent:

- Communicate in a way that is safe and respectful for everyone. Some parents and resource parents use a journal to list notes they want to share about their child—such as nap schedules and food preferences—or short questions they want to ask the resource



“My visits with my daughter are the most important 90 minutes of my whole week. I do everything I can to be prepared and stay positive because I know that time is important to her, too. Those visits with my daughter help me stay focused on what's really important in my life and what my priorities are. For me, that's being the best father I can be for her.”—Jacob, parent from Oregon, BPNN

parent the next time they see them or after the child's last visit. Resource and birth parents sometimes use other forms of communication to provide updates. These include email or texts to each other or sharing information with the caseworker.

- Tell the resource parent as much as you can about your child, including his or her likes and dislikes, fears, and favorite ways to be comforted. You know your child better than anyone, and this will help the resource parent take the best possible care of your child and help him or her feel safe and secure.
- Let your child know that his or her resource parent cares. It may help your child feel more comfortable if he or she sees you and the resource parent supporting each other.

For more information about building relationships with resource parents, read the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership's [relationship building guide](#).

WHAT HAPPENS AS REUNIFICATION GETS CLOSER

As you get close to finishing the steps in your case plan, you may also spend more quality family time with your child (overnights, weekends, or more). Soon, your child may come for a home visit. This means that he or she will stay with you temporarily but that the agency still maintains legal custody for a period of time.

As reunification nears, preparing for your child's move home is important. Continue to use the services in your case plan and other community resources as needed. Talk to your caseworker about timelines for your child's return, the progress you are making with your services, and any behavioral and mental health concerns. Find out whether additional steps may be necessary to build a safe home environment and make sure you are aware of and prepared for any upcoming procedural steps, such as court hearings.

As reunification gets closer, think about what resources may help you and your family set the stage for your child to thrive and prepare for potentially difficult moments. Work with your caseworker, perhaps through a family group conference or family team meeting, to identify the services you will need when your child comes home. Identify community and natural supports for your family (such as neighborhood and community centers, child care, support groups, and family members and friends that can support your family during the transition). Many parents in this situation talk about the importance of being part of a community of people who know what they are going through and who have been through it themselves. This is a good time to think about people you know who have lived this experience and may provide support or advice when your child returns home.

WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER YOUR CHILD COMES HOME

When you have completed your personal and case plan goals and your family is reunited, everyone will need time to readjust to living together. You can assist your family during this period by asking for help if you need it. When you need advice, company, or time away from home, reach out to your natural and community supporters who will be available after your case is dismissed. You can also reach out to your caseworker, GAL, or peer support.

ADJUSTING

After family separation, many parents have reported mixed emotions when reunification occurs. Emotions can range from excitement and gratitude to fear and concern about the impact of your family's separation on your child and your relationship. You may feel sadness about missed milestones, while also feeling proud of your strength and resilience in overcoming challenges. Your child may have difficulty transitioning because he or she may miss new friends and the resource family. Your child may struggle with differences between your home and the foster home, including rules, schedules, and food. It is important to let him or her know having those feelings is okay, including missing the resource family. While difficult, practice patience with your child and yourself during this time.

CONTINUING ENGAGEMENT

After you and your child reunite, the child welfare agency may keep your family's file open for a while and continue providing in-home services. This might include someone coming to your home to help you work on your parenting skills; community-based services, such as child care or counseling; or other services you received before reunification. These services are meant to support your family during the reunification transition. It's okay to ask for additional help from your caseworker, attorney, or parent partner. If you're not sure how the agency will react to something, talk to your lawyer first. He or she may be able to help you ask for what you need.

If you have a good relationship with your child's resource parent, he or she and his or her family can be a tremendous support for you and your child. They know and care about your child and have seen the hard work you put into reunifying your family. Resource parents and their family members may want to see your child regularly. As your child eases into reunification, he or she may also want to see the resource family. Take help from the family or anyone else you trust so you can make time to care for yourself. It's been a long journey. **You deserve the help.**



"My daughter and I were blessed with an opportunity to connect with her foster parents almost a year after our case closed. I saw how bonded they all were and embraced the notion of them being extended family. As a result, they have shown us nothing but positive support and assistance, such as childcare. I would love to see a system where these opportunities to partner between birth parent and foster parent become the norm since we are all coming together on behalf of the child."—Alise, BPNN, Washington

National Parent & Youth Helpline

The [National Parent & Youth Helpline](https://www.childwelfare.gov/npyh/) (1-855-427-2736), operated by [Parents Anonymous](https://www.childwelfare.gov/npyh/), provides emotional support and information about where you can go for help. The National Parent & Youth Helpline website has [resources for parents](https://www.childwelfare.gov/npyh/resources-for-parents/) on a variety of topics and provides information about State-specific resources.

GIVING BACK

Once you have successfully completed the reunification process, consider using your experience to help others. You may like to help other families experiencing what your family went through. Your voice could make an important difference to them. You may find it rewarding to work as a parent mentor in your area. In that role, you can encourage others and show them, "If I can do it, you can too!" See the list of national parent and family organizations at the end of this factsheet to help you find ways to give back. **You can make a difference!**

NATIONAL PARENT AND FAMILY ORGANIZATIONS

[Birth and Foster Parent Partnership](#): Creates partnerships among birth and foster parents interested in advocating for children and families

[Birth Parent National Network](#): Works to champion birth parents as leaders and partners in child welfare systems reform

[Circle of Parents](#): Provides a friendly, supportive environment, led by parents and other caregivers, where anyone in a parenting role can openly discuss the successes and challenges of raising children

[Parents Anonymous](#): Supports the empowerment journey of parents, children, and youth to build on the strengths of families and communities through shared leadership strategies that promote positive outcomes for all families

"After successfully reuniting with my daughter, I know the importance of keeping families together and helping us build protective factors. As parents, we need to be engaged early; helped to obtain needed services; and supported in overcoming challenges such as waiting lists, transportation, child care, financial obstacles, language, and cultural barriers." —Timothy, BPNN, Oregon

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