

Child and Youth Connections:

Results From CFSR Round 3 (2015–2018)



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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children & Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
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Introduction

A child's¹ connections with others are critical, as they provide the foundation for healthy development. These connections are with family (parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives) and with people in their community (extended kin, teachers, coaches, counselors, peers, neighbors, faith groups, and others). Strong and stable connections are necessary for all children to develop a sense of self and the ability to form secure attachments. They are especially important for children who have experienced trauma, including maltreatment and removal from the home, as trauma impairs the normal development of the brain and nervous system, the immune system, and the body's stress response systems.² Children who are placed in foster care are at risk of experiencing unintended and negative consequences across their lifespans, even when out-of-home placements are necessary to protect them. Removal from the home and continued separation from children's primary caregivers can complicate the ability to maintain and nurture relationships and the prospects of reunification.³ Connections are a key protective factor for children throughout their involvement with the child welfare system.

State child welfare systems, including but not limited to child welfare agencies, the judicial and legal communities, Tribes, and service providers, are responsible for preserving the important connections of the children they serve. To help minimize trauma and support the healthy development of children in foster care, the child welfare system needs to provide parents and children with meaningful and nurturing family time. Viewing child and family contacts during foster care less as "visits" and more as "family time" suggests the critical importance of the length and quality of time that children spend with their parents, separated siblings, and other important family members. Family time can occur when the parent and/or family participates in normal parenting activities, such as sharing meals, medical appointments, and school events. It can occur in the homes of resource families or in the family's home. The frequency, duration, and

When a child is placed in foster care, there can be long-term consequences for the child and family. Connections are a key protective factor for children throughout their involvement with the child welfare system. Parent-child separations, even short or necessary ones, can cause trauma.⁴

¹ For the purposes of this report and ease of reference, the terms "child" and "children" are sometimes used and encompass both children and youth.

² National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *Complex trauma*. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma>

³ Children's Bureau. (2020, February 5). *IM-20-02*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im2002.pdf>

⁴ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

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intensity of family time takes into account the needs of children, depending upon their age and stage of development, and the capacities of parents to share parenting roles with resource families.⁵ The system also needs to promote and maintain children’s connections to their parents, siblings, extended family members/kin, peers, Tribes, cultural identity, and communities.

This report was finalized during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in considerable limitations for child welfare systems to support direct in-person family time. Restrictions imposed in response to the public health emergency vary across jurisdictions and have resulted in a wide array of practice adaptations. The adjustments are likely to evolve and may already be changing in some states. Although there will be continued challenges to maintain safe in-person contact for children, siblings, and parents, the results of this report remain important and relevant.

Purpose of the Report

The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) help states improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families who receive services through the child welfare system. The CSFRs are

an important tool that enables the Children’s Bureau to (1) ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements; (2) determine what is happening to children and families receiving child welfare services; and (3) assist states in enhancing their capacity to help children and families achieve positive outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being.⁶

This report uses Round 3 (2015–2018) CSFR results to understand how, how often, and how well child welfare systems helped to promote and preserve children’s connections in four areas: with parents; with siblings; with extended family; and with children’s community, culture, school, and friends. In each area, data from Round 3 of the CSFRs provides information about state child welfare systems regarding:

- How well they maintained children’s important connections
- The resources and case practices they used to preserve and promote children’s connections
- Challenges they experienced in preserving and promoting children’s connections

Results

The results were derived from descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis of case rating rationales for 2,486 cases involving children in foster care. This report includes information from stakeholder interviews to represent youth, parent, and resource family voices on child welfare system performance. It is important to note that while the case ratings reflect individual cases, stakeholder interviews can cover broader perspectives on child welfare practice and systemic issues. Qualitative results from stakeholder interviews are not directly comparable to the case item ratings. Results typically represent performance during a finite period of time on a small sample of cases from each state and on

⁵ Children’s Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

⁶ Children’s Bureau. (n.d.). *Children’s Bureau Child and Family Services Reviews fact sheet*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr_general_factsheet.pdf

⁷ Demographic characteristics are only available for children in foster care. For more information, see Child and Family Services Reviews Aggregate Report: Round 3: Fiscal Years 2015–2018.

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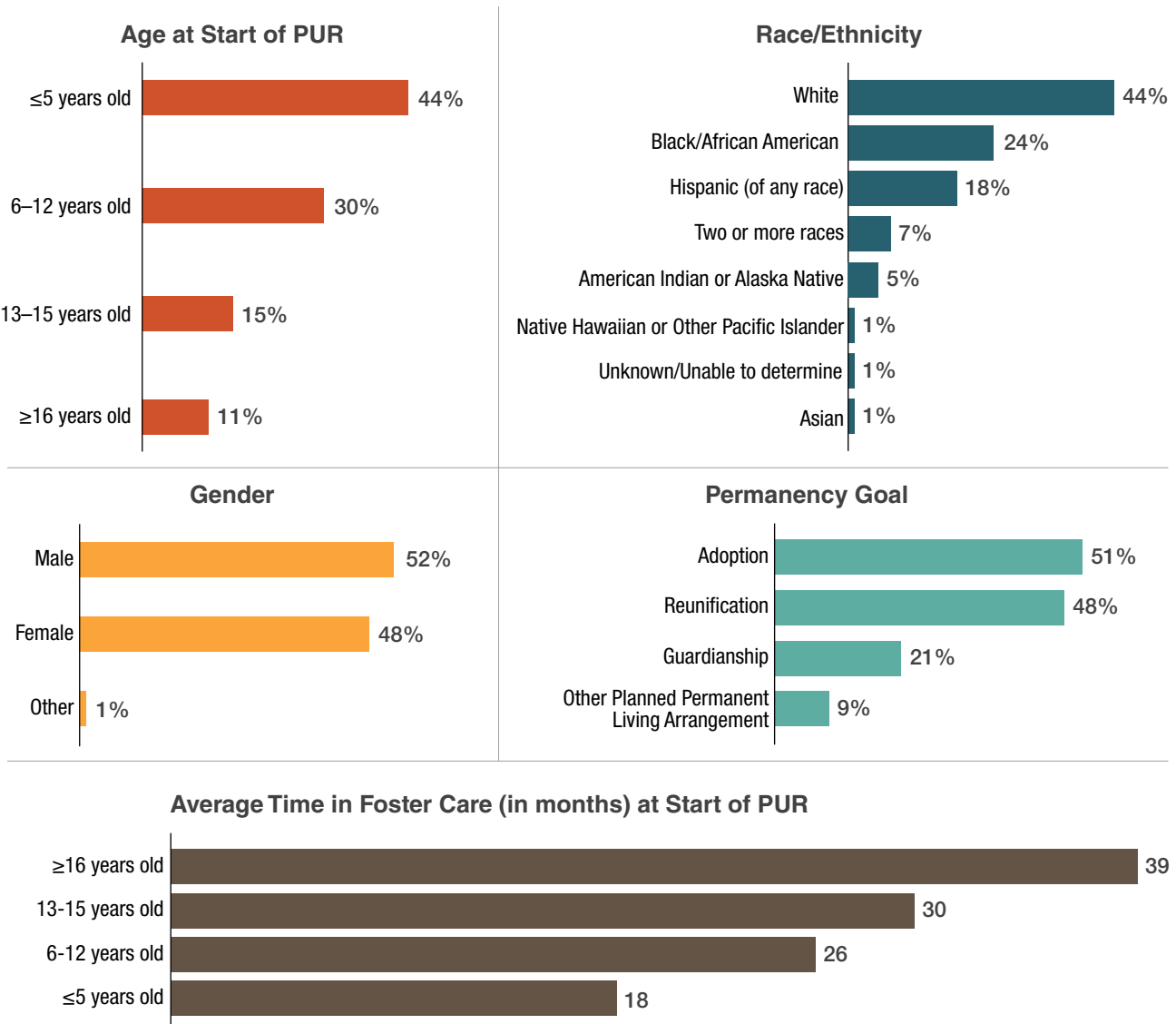
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interviews with select groups of stakeholders. Thus, the results cannot be considered fully representative of national characteristics of the child welfare system. However, the results help illuminate areas of practice and system strengths, challenges, and opportunities to focus improvement activities to better care for children and families involved in child welfare systems.

To provide context for the results, it is useful to understand some of the demographic⁷ and case

characteristics of the children in foster care whose cases were reviewed during Round 3. For example, as seen in **Figure 1**, the majority of children in foster care were 5 years old or younger at the start of the period under review (PUR), White, male, had a permanency goal of adoption, and were in foster care over 18 months prior to the start date of the PUR. Some case characteristics, such as gender and permanency goal type, had similar results.

Figure 1: Demographic and Case Characteristics for Children in Foster Care



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Connections With Parents

Maintaining connections with parents is especially important for children. A growing body of research associates regular, meaningful family time for children in out-of-home care with several positive outcomes, including improved emotional well-being for parents and children.⁸ Even if reunification cannot happen, parental connections can positively affect children's mental health.⁹

Advocate for family time between parents and children as soon as possible after removal to help mitigate trauma and feelings of loss.¹⁰

The CF SRs assessed child welfare systems' efforts to support parent-child relationships by assessing case practices around frequent and quality parent-child family time and the relationship of children in care with the parents from whom the child was removed and with whom the agency is working toward reunification.

Frequency and Quality of Family Time Between Parents and Children in Foster Care

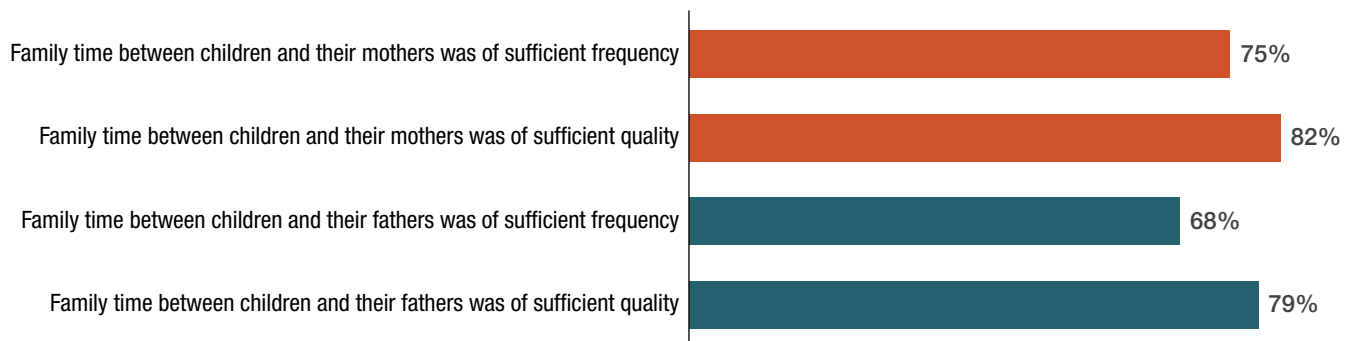
Family time is critical to maintaining the parent-child relationship when a child is in out-of-home care.

Facilitating and supporting frequent and quality family time between children and their parents promotes continuity in the child's relationship with these primary caregivers and improves parent and child well-being outcomes.

If there is no immediate danger of harm, unsupervised family time can be arranged, especially for families with older children or families who experienced neglect. Supervision can and often does affect the comfort levels of parents and children and can inhibit the ability of a parent or child to interact freely.¹¹ As seen in **Figure 2**, additional efforts are needed to ensure that child welfare systems provide more frequent and quality parent-child family time for both mothers and fathers.

It is important for agencies and judges to be mindful that ending or reducing family time as a form of punishment for noncompliance may also have deleterious effects on parental progress and cause additional challenges or setbacks in treatment and recovery. Family time plans should consider the parent's circumstances, including the resources to which they might have access. When a parent cannot attend family time, it is important not to assume a lack of interest.¹²

Figure 2: Family Time With Parents



⁸ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

⁹ McWey, L. M., Acock, A., & Porter, B. E. (2010). The impact of continued contact with biological parents upon the mental health of children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(10), 1338–1345. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2928481/>

¹⁰ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

¹¹ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

¹² Children's Bureau, *IM-19-03*.

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Research shows that regular, meaningful family time for children and youth in out-of-home care is associated with several positive outcomes,¹³ including:

- Enhanced parental engagement
- Greater likelihood of reunification
- Expedited permanency
- Increased chances of reunification being sustained
- More meaningful connections to parents for older youth without reunification as permanency goal
- Improved emotional well-being for parents and children

Youth Voices

“Overnight and weekend visits [with my father] assisted in strengthening our connection.” — Youth during stakeholder interview

Practice strengths regarding family time between children and their parents included:

- Adjusting the frequency of parent-child family time, the location of the family time (e.g., in the home or in the resource family home), and the level of supervision (supervised, partially supervised, unsupervised) to support the achievement of the case goals and alignment with the family circumstances
- Working with relative caregivers to coordinate family time between children and their parents, creating a more natural experience
- Supplementing in-person family time by talking on the phone or via video stream, texting, and using other social media platforms helped to maintain connections

Practice concerns regarding family time between children and their parents included:

- A reduction in ongoing efforts to locate and engage parents when initial efforts were unsuccessful
- A lack of transportation or other resources to assist parents in attending and participating in family time

- Not having family time in places that supported and allowed families to participate in normal parenting activities
- Not adjusting the frequency, duration, and level of supervision of family time based on case progress, changing circumstances, and safety concerns

Parent Voices

During a stakeholder interview, some parents said there was a lack of opportunity for family time. Family time was limited to once a week for 1.5 hours, for example. Parents had to be creative and find services that would increase family time, including arranging transportation.



Spotlight Section: Promising Programs, Models, and Practices: *Family Time Center*

Family time can occur when parents and/or families participate in normal parenting activities (e.g., sharing meals, jointly attending medical appointments and school events). Hancock County, Mississippi, has converted a former children’s shelter into a family time meeting place. The building is set up to feel like a home and includes living room spaces, play space for children inside and outside, a reading room/library, and a functioning kitchen and dining area to allow families to spend time together in natural ways. Families are encouraged to bring food so

¹³ Children’s Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

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they may prepare and share meals. The county provides groceries in the kitchen for families who may not be able to afford to bring food on their own so they do not miss the opportunity to share family meals. Most notably, to promote healthy parent-child bonding and attachment, parents of infants may have family time as often and for as long as they can.

Relationship of the Child in Care With Parents

Designated parent-child family time seldom completely fulfills the need for parents and children to spend meaningful and nurturing time together. Relationships between parents and children can also be maintained and enhanced by supporting parents' participation in their children's activities and by fully encouraging and supporting parents' involvement in everyday parenting routines and decisions. To help strengthen parents' capacity, it is useful for them to be included in the child's daily routines and to be involved in such things as helping with homework, preparing meals, and attending appointments or school events and extracurricular activities. Furthermore, parents have reported that spending time with their children and being involved in their lives motivated them to complete their case plans.¹⁴

Research shows that children participating in more frequent and regular time with parents exhibit more positive outcomes when compared with peers who participate in less frequent or regular time with parents¹⁵ Such outcomes include:

- Stronger attachments to their parents
- Improved child well being
- Fewer behavioral problems, including both internalizing and externalizing problems
- Lower levels of depression
- Better adjustment

Parent Voices

During a stakeholder interview, one parent said the agency *“helped me get my son into a local soccer program and provided supplies for us to do camping and other activities we could do with our children.”*

Another parent said *“the most underused resource is relation[ship] building between the parent and [resource] parent. They [resource parents] have served as encouragers and are now a resource even though [our] child is no longer in care.”*

Resource Parent Voices

During a stakeholder interview with resource parents, several reported trying to help and support parents, including texting parents, keeping notebooks for them, and advocating for them. One resource parent said, *“Parents deserve help, too, and try to keep in mind parents are human.”* Another resource parent said, *“We take care of other peoples' kids, and [we] will be an advocate for parents as long as they are part of the team.”* One resource parent commented, *“[I] ask for a meeting with the parent, myself, and the worker so I can gather information from the parent that I need to care for the child in my home.”*

As **Figure 3** shows, in **58%** of cases reviewed, child welfare agencies made concerted efforts to promote, support, and/or maintain positive relationships between the child in foster care and his or her mother and father through activities other than arranging dedicated and regular in-person family time with parents. There were differences in performance for mothers and fathers. In **65%** of cases, concerted efforts were made during the PUR to promote, support, and otherwise maintain a positive and nurturing relationship between the child in foster care and his or her mother; the same occurred in **56%** of cases for the child in foster care and his or her father.

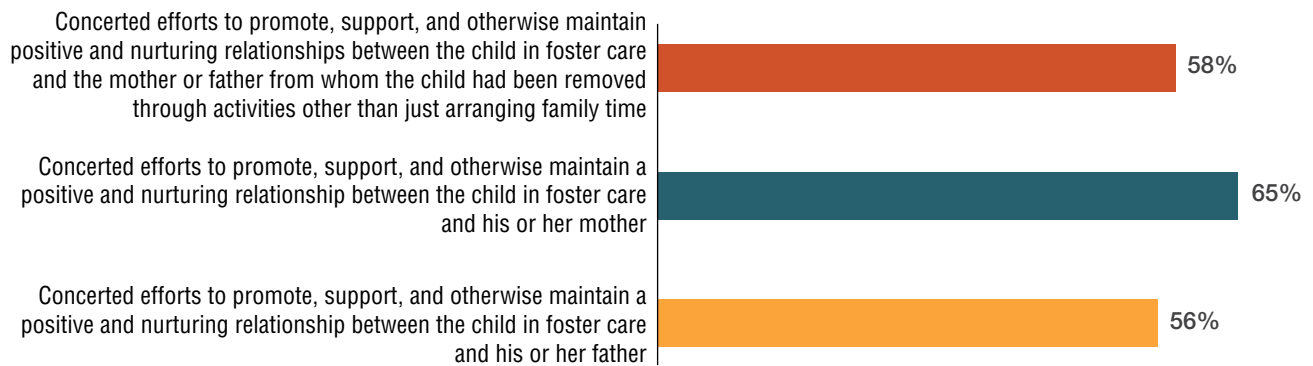
¹⁴ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

¹⁵ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

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Figure 3: Relationship of Child in Care With Parents



Practice strengths regarding promoting, supporting, and maintaining positive relationships between the child in foster care and his or her parents other than arranging family time included:

- Parents being encouraged and supported to attend a variety of children’s activities, such as medical appointments, therapeutic sessions, school activities, school conferences, extracurricular activities, birthday parties, community-based activities, and faith services
- Workers who were engaged in ongoing conversations with parents and children using tools such as shared calendars, texting, and phone calls to provide flexibility in coordinating parents’ attendance at children’s activities
- Parents partnering with resource parents, who are encouraged to provide mentoring or serve as role models

Practice concerns regarding promoting, supporting, and maintaining positive relationships between the child in foster care and his or her parents other than arranging family time included:

- Caseworkers being less likely to make concerted efforts to encourage parents’ participation in educational, medical, recreational, religious, or other activities when children were not placed in their home communities

- Lack of efforts to effectively engage parents, resulting in decreased opportunities to promote the parent-child relationship outside of dedicated and regular in-person family time
- Parents not being encouraged to or supported in attending or participating in children’s educational, recreational, medical, religious or other activities

Spotlight Section: Promising Programs, Models, and Practices: Center for Family Life

A number of jurisdictions are increasing access to family time, improving the experiences of parents and children during that time and reducing the costs associated with facilitation (both transportation and staff time) by working with community-based organizations. New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) worked with community partners and providers to maintain and strengthen the relationships that parents have with their children when placement in out-of-home care is necessary. One such effort is supported by the Center for Family Life (CFL), an ACS-contracted service provider. CFL is a community-based provider in Brooklyn, NY. CFL operates a foster care program for ACS that focuses on building positive relationships between parents with children in foster care and resource parents. CFL has set the expectation that parents with children in foster care will remain involved in the daily routines of their children’s

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lives. Children are placed near where the parent lives, and the resource parent works directly with the parent to set daily schedules whereby the parent will regularly be in the foster home helping their children prepare for school, do homework, prepare and eat meals, play, and attend appointments or school events. The goal is meaningful and ongoing contact and involvement, seamlessly blending foster care and family time. CFL also provides additional support to parents and families to help build protective capacities, connections to community resources, and programs to promote economic mobility, which help increase the likelihood of sustained family reunification.

Icebreaker Meetings

After children are removed from their parents, they may be scared, confused, and wondering what is happening to their families; why they are no longer with their families; and what the future may bring. Children may imagine worst-case scenarios or feel abandoned when they have incomplete information about their parents and families. Removal of children from their home and family is traumatic. When children do not have family time with their parents for days or weeks after the initial separation, stress responses can be exacerbated, which could compound the trauma of removal.¹⁶

Icebreakers are child-focused, face-to-face meetings held between parents and resource families as soon as possible after a child is placed in out-of-home care. Ideally, the meetings are held no later than 3 to 5 days after placement and whenever a child experiences a placement change. Some states are enhancing the process by calling parents within 24 hours of the child being removed from the home to provide an update on their child(ren) and to set up the first icebreaker call or meeting. Icebreakers benefit children, parents, and caregivers by sharing important information about a child and being the first step in building a relationship between

the child's parents and the new caregivers. Both are critical in reducing the trauma a child experiences as a result of placement. The meetings allow for an exchange of information about the child: What foods does she/he like? What helps her/him fall asleep? Does she/he like pets? What helps her/him get to school in the morning? What activities and appointments need to be or are scheduled for the child? These meetings can help:

- Reduce the trauma of foster care placement for children
- Introduce parents and caregivers in order to share information
- Build alliances among adults when children are in congregate care
- Begin relationship building and a sense of teamwork
- Improve everyone's ability to help a child, including the caseworker

For more information, visit <https://www.aecf.org/resources/icebreaker-meetings/>



¹⁶ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

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Key Takeaways for Children’s Connections With Parents

State child welfare systems need to improve practices to ensure that children’s connections with their parents are maintained and promoted both through dedicated and regular in-person parent-child family time and supporting parents’ active involvement in typical daily parenting activities. Viewing child and parent contacts while a child is in foster care as less like visits and more like family time emphasizes the importance of the length and quality of time that children spend with their parents.

Specific strategies to promote parent-child relationships include:

- Having resource parents provide opportunities to support the entire family with parent-child interaction centered around daily living activities, such as meal preparation, homework, chores, and naptime rituals
- Providing comfortable environments for families to participate in family time to facilitate nurturing and bonding
- Encouraging and providing mechanisms to support parental participation in activities, including children’s school activities, medical appointments, and extracurricular activities
- Addressing barriers such as a lack of transportation so parents can participate in family time
- Encouraging and providing mechanisms to support varied forms of communication between children and parents, especially for parents who do not live near their children (e.g., the use of video streaming)

Family time is often important for children and youth, even when the goal is not reunification. In many situations, continued connections for children are important for other permanency goals (e.g., open adoption, adoption, guardianship with relative). It is particularly important for youth with the goal of other planned permanent living arrangement (OPPLA). Family time with older youth is important because even where a parent may not be an option as a caregiver, they can be a valued member of the youth’s network of support; even in instances of termination of parental rights.¹⁷

Youth Voices

“My current home is adopting me. [We] have a good relationship with my mother and [the agency] helped to create that relationship.”—Youth during stakeholder interview

Connections With Brothers and Sisters

Sibling relationships are critically important not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime. These relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout life and are likely to be the longest relationships that most people experience.¹⁸ Sibling connections can improve resilience, promote family ties, and strengthen long-term connections. When preserved, bonds with siblings can help buffer the effects of maltreatment and negative events, such as removal from the home.¹⁹ It is important that children’s connections to their siblings are maintained when the children are in foster care and when a child’s siblings are not in foster care.

The CFSS assessed the child welfare system’s efforts to promote and support children’s connections to their siblings through placement with them, and when children are not placed with their siblings, through family time with them while in foster care.

¹⁷ Children’s Bureau, *IM–20–02*.

¹⁸ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019, June). *Sibling issues in foster care and adoption*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/siblingissues.pdf>

¹⁹ Wojciak, A., S.; McWey, L. M., & Waid, J. (2018). Sibling relationships of youth in foster care: A predictor of resilience. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 84, 247–254. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/cysrev/v84y2018icp247-254.html>

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Spotlight Section: Promising Programs, Models, and Practices: *Neighbor to Family Sibling Foster Care Model*

Several jurisdictions have implemented a nationally accredited and evidence-based sibling foster care program. The program places abused and neglected children with their siblings in safe and stable resource family homes from initial placement to permanency. The mission of the program is to transform foster care by keeping siblings together while building healthier families and stronger communities. The program screens, provides high-quality training, and professionalizes caregivers who mentor parents of children placed in their home. Parents are accountable for the long-term well-being of their children, and permanency planning is a consistent and purposeful focus of team meetings. The program reports that children typically return to their own homes or alternative permanent placements in less than 9 months.

For more information, visit

<https://www.neighbortofamily.org/>

Placing Brothers and Sisters Together in Foster Care

Placing siblings together and/or maintaining their relationships when they are placed apart positively

affect children’s mental health, school performance, relationships with resource parents, and adjustment to a new home.²⁰ Additionally, placing siblings together can improve permanency outcomes, such as placement stability and even reunification.²¹

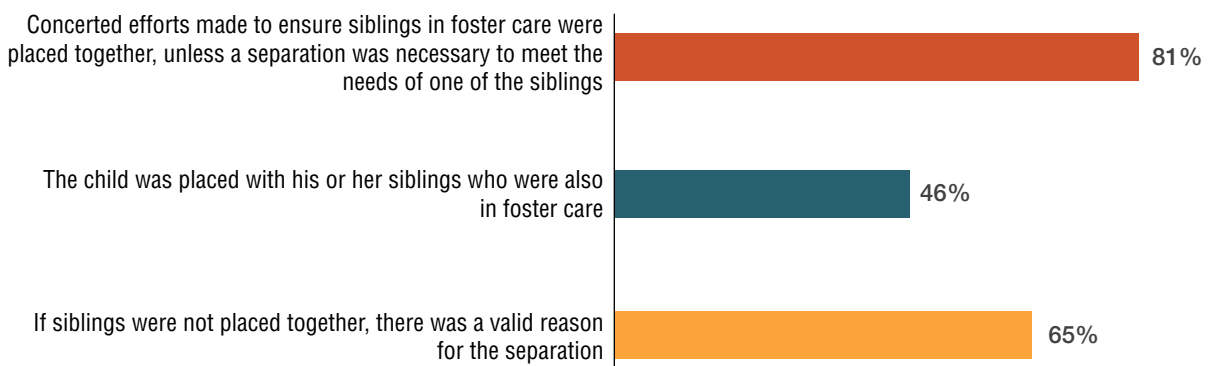
As shown in **Figure 4**, in **81%** of cases where the child had a brother or sister also in foster care, the agency made concerted efforts to ensure that they were placed together, unless a separation was necessary to meet the needs of one of them. Children were placed with siblings who were also in foster care in **46%** of cases. If the child was not placed with siblings, there was a valid reason for the child’s separation from them in **65%** of the cases.

There was not a valid reason for placing a child separately from his or her brothers and sisters in **35%** of the foster care cases reviewed.

Reasons Brothers and Sisters Were Placed in Different Placement Settings

In certain circumstances, state child welfare systems provided valid reasons for placing siblings separately.

Figure 4: Placing Children With Their Brothers and Sisters



²⁰ Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Sibling issues*.

²¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Sibling issues*.

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Examples of reasons for separation included:

- Before being involved with the child welfare system, parents had voluntarily placed children in separate homes, usually with relatives. The child welfare agency determined that these placements would provide continued stability and were in the best interests of the child
- Children were placed separately when the child or a brother or sister required a higher level of care
- Siblings with different fathers were placed with paternal relatives who were unable to care for all of the children

While not a federally supported reason for separation, sometimes children were placed separately from their siblings because of a general shortage of resource parents or a shortage of resource families who could care for them. Sibling separations sometimes occurred when children came into care at different times, e.g., an infant coming into care after his or her sibling had already been placed in foster care. Additionally, agencies were sometimes unclear about the reason for the initial separation, and ongoing efforts were not made to reassess placement decisions or to continue exploring other options for placing siblings together.

Practice strengths regarding placing siblings together included:

- Initially placing children in foster care with their siblings as they were more apt to remain together throughout the PUR
- Agencies encouraging and supporting resource families to care for groups of siblings
- Child welfare agencies making efforts to reassess placements in which siblings were placed separately
- Relatives being used to place siblings together

Practice concerns regarding placing siblings together included:

- A lack of placement resources, including resource families able to accept sibling groups
- Agencies not making efforts to place siblings together after an initial separation even in those circumstances when the reason for the initial separation was valid

Family Time Between Brothers and Sisters When They Were Placed Separately

When children are not placed with their siblings who are also in foster care, family time with siblings is vital to maintain their connections and support. As shown in **Figure 5**, family time (or other forms of contact) between the child and his or her siblings was of sufficient frequency to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship in **66%** of cases. The quality of family time between the child and his or her siblings was sufficient to promote the continuity of their relationships in **75%** of cases.

Advocate for family time between siblings when they are in separate placements.²²

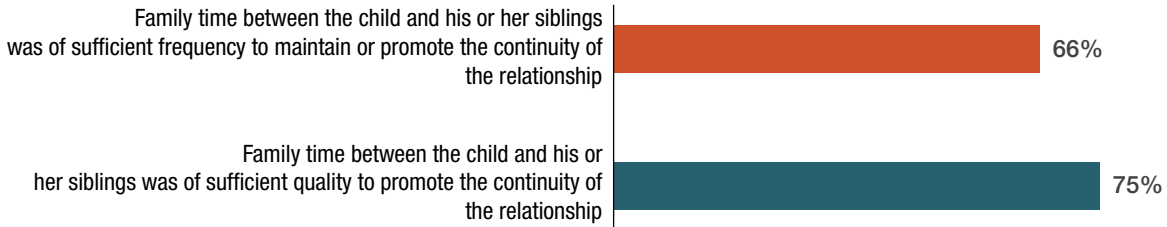


²² Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

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Figure 5: Children's Connections With Brothers and Sisters



Youth Voices

“[The agency] held a party where I was able to see my siblings. It was easier to see my siblings when the agency sponsored events, and I wish this could happen more often.” — Youth during stakeholder interview.

Another youth said that *“because there was little visitation with [my] siblings while in foster care, those relationships had to be re-built.”*

Parent Voices

During a stakeholder interview, one interviewer noted that parents said siblings are split up and only see each other once a week when they have family time with their parents.

Practice strengths regarding sibling family time included:

- Relatives providing ongoing support for family time that included opportunities for children in care to interact with their siblings
- Child welfare agencies providing frequent contact between siblings outside of family time with parents

Practice concerns regarding sibling family time included:

- Minimal or no family time occurring when children were placed separately from their siblings

- Agencies not addressing challenges related to arranging family time between siblings when children required a high level of specialized care
- When children had different fathers and were placed separately with relatives, the child welfare agency not promoting or encouraging continued connections for siblings

It is recommended that caseworkers ensure that family time is a central part of every case plan.²³



²³ Children's Bureau, *IM-20-02*.

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Key Takeaways for Children’s Connections With Brothers and Sisters

Results concerning children’s connections with their siblings show that state child welfare systems need to make additional efforts to maintain and support children’s connections with their siblings.

Specific strategies to promote and strengthen these relationships include:

- Identifying relative caregivers to place siblings together and support their relationships
- Recruiting resource families able to accept sibling groups
- Implementing practices to reassess placement of siblings together when separated
- Ensuring dedicated and frequent in-person family time is provided for siblings

Connections With Extended Family

Extended families can be a source of stability and permanency for children. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives provide an important safety net for children whose parents are unavailable or unable to safely care for them. The support from these relatives can often help reunify children with their parents.²⁴ Children placed with kin and fictive kin are shown to have greater placement stability, fewer emotional and behavioral problems during placement, a lower incidence of reactive attachment disorder, and more connections to their families and socio-cultural communities than children placed in non-kin resource homes.²⁵

Youth Voices

During a stakeholder interview, youth shared the importance of “talking to members of their extended families [like] grandmothers [and] aunts.”

Even when children are not placed with relatives, it is important for them to remain in contact with relatives who were part of their lives before they came into foster care and to establish new relationships with other relatives. The CFSR specifically assessed case practices that support connections with extended family by looking at efforts to place children with their relatives.

It is important to leverage a wide array of resources to help locate and involve relatives or kin supportive of parent-child contact when removal is necessary.²⁶

Placement With Relatives

Placing a child with his or her relatives can provide the child with stability and promote the achievement of permanency for the child. As shown in **Figure 6**, in **70%** of cases, the state child welfare agency made concerted efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate relatives as potential placements for the child. In **37%** of cases, a child’s current or most recent placement if no longer in foster care was with a relative. When the child was placed with a relative, the child’s placement was assessed to be appropriate and stable in **93%** of cases reviewed.



²⁴ Pew Charitable Trusts. (2007). *Time for reform: Support relatives in providing foster care and permanent families for children*. https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/foster_care_reform/supportingrelativespdf.pdf

²⁵ Sugrue, E. (2019). *Evidence base for avoiding family separation in child welfare practice*. Alia. <http://www.thetcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Alia-Research-Brief-2019.pdf>

²⁶ Children’s Bureau, *IM–20–02*.

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There is sometimes a difference between efforts to place children with their relatives and the number of children who are placed with relatives. This happens in some cases because identified relatives were not made placement resources. Reasons could include their having disqualifying criminal records, unresolved risk and safety concerns, or a concerning child maltreatment history; being unwilling to take the child(ren); or not otherwise determined to meet the child’s best interests as a placement resource.

There were differences in agency efforts to work with maternal and paternal relatives. As shown in **Figure 7**, the agency made concerted efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate maternal relatives as potential placements for the child in **56%** of cases. Concerted efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate paternal relatives as potential placements for the child were made in **47%** of cases.

Parent Voices

During a stakeholder interview, one interviewer noted that parents expressed concerns with “a lack of available homes in the region where children live, [which] can affect reunification of families and children.”

In another stakeholder interview, one interviewer summarized that “other parents whose children were placed with relatives reported much more frequent contact, sometimes daily, with family time taking place in the relative’s home.”

Practice strengths related to maintaining children’s connections with extended family by placing children with relatives included:

- Identifying and placing children with relatives
- Providing support to relative caregivers to help maintain placement stability
- Caseworkers working actively with American Indian/ Native American Tribes to secure relative placements
- Caseworkers facilitating multi-disciplinary meetings focused on relative placement options for children in care

Practice concerns related to maintaining children’s connections with extended family by placing children with relatives included:

- Caseworkers not making efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate paternal relatives for placement when mothers refused to share information about paternal relatives

Figure 6: Efforts to Place Children With Relatives

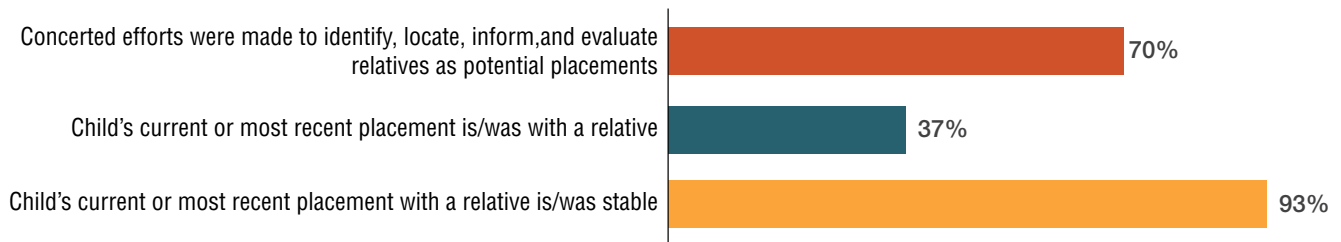
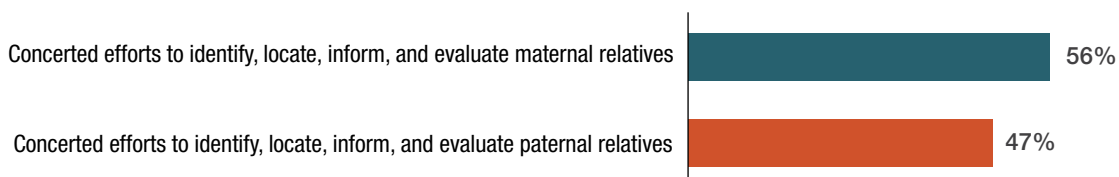


Figure 7: Percentage of Cases Where Agency Made Concerted Efforts to Identify, Locate, Inform, and Evaluate Maternal and Paternal Relatives



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- Caseworkers not reassessing relatives as placement options on an ongoing basis, especially when case circumstances changed
- Relatives not being helped in completing the home study and/or licensing process
- Relative caregivers not receiving adequate services to support their ability to care for children, especially when children had behavioral, mental, and/or physical needs

Spotlight Section: Promising Programs, Models, and Practices: Family Finding

A global Family Finding Model provides strategies to locate and engage relatives of children in foster care. The goal of Family Finding is to connect each child with a family to enable children to have lifelong connections that only a family provides, by:

1. Discovering at least 40 family members and important people in the child's life
2. Engaging multiple family members and supportive adults through participation in a planning meeting
3. Planning for the successful future of the child with the participation of family members

4. Making decisions during family meetings that support the child's legal and emotional permanency
5. Evaluating the permanency plans developed
6. Providing follow-up supports to ensure the child and family can maintain their permanency plans

For more information, visit <http://www.familyfinding.org/>



Key Takeaways for Maintaining Children's Connections With Extended Family By Placing With Relatives

Results show that state child welfare systems need to make continuing efforts to consistently identify, locate, inform, and evaluate relative placements, especially paternal relatives.

Specific strategies for supporting children's connections with extended family and placement stability include:

- Implementing effective searches for relatives (including paternal relatives who may be overlooked) before initial placement into foster care, and continuing those searches throughout the child's time in foster care
- Interviewing the children (if age appropriate) and parents to identify relatives who may provide a placement or ongoing support. If these efforts do not yield relatives, more intensive activities using search engines, government databases, social media, and emergency school contacts can follow
- Having dedicated staff who can assist caseworkers in conducting relative searches, and then supporting relatives through the home study and licensing processes
- Providing relative caregivers with the same levels of training, education, and ongoing support so they are able to adequately care and provide for the children placed in their homes

Child and Youth Connections:

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Preserving Connections With Extended Family, Community, Culture, School, and Friends

Shared values, customs, and histories shape a child's view of the world, their thinking, and their behavior.

A shared cultural heritage bonds communities and families together, creating a sense of identity, normalcy, and belonging. Supporting community connections helps sustain vital connections, encourages continuity, and creates emotional comfort. These efforts support healthy development and general child well-being. Children removed from their communities are at risk of losing important connections without concerted efforts to promote and maintain those connections. Making concerted efforts for children to remain in their same communities and ensuring they have consistent access to their extended families, teachers, neighbors, friends, faith groups, coaches, sports teams, and others can provide critical support for children, along with a sense of normalcy.

Relationship-building skills are formed throughout childhood, based on children's interactions with others while growing up. Children who do not experience positive relationships may have underdeveloped relationship-building skills when they exit foster care.²⁷ Research shows that key challenges for youth who have



aged out of foster care include a lack of connections with others. The connections formed and sustained during child welfare involvement could potentially help alleviate those challenges.²⁸

Overall, in **67%** of cases involving children in foster care reviewed in the CF SR, state child welfare agencies made concerted efforts to maintain the child's connections to his or her neighborhood, community, faith, extended family, Tribe, school, and friends.

Youth Voices

During a stakeholder interview, one youth reported being placed in a foster home with a family friend, so it did not feel like she was ever in foster care.

Another youth commented that their independent living services worker provided practical educational resources (e.g., banking, budgeting, and employment information), engaged them in community activities, and made it possible for them to participate in sports. Additionally, the worker made sure that people important to the youth could attend their sporting events while the youth was still in foster care.

One interviewer noted that *“one of the challenges [youth] face is having friends and a social life. When they transfer schools often, it becomes hard for them to continue to be involved in extracurricular activities or maintain friendships. Some said that they have no one to pay their phone bills, which also makes it difficult to maintain friendships.”*

Resource Parent Voices

“The refugee center in the community has helped the agency connect us with needed services outside of the services we already have available for Latino and Native American Families.”—Resource parent during stakeholder interview

²⁷ Denby, R., Gomez, E., and Reeves, R. V. (2017). *Care and connections: Bridging relational gaps for foster youths*. The Brookings Institution Center on Children and Families. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/09-14-2017_fostercarereport2.pdf

²⁸ Youth.gov (2012). *Young adults formerly in foster care: Challenges and solutions*. <https://youth.gov/youth-briefs/foster-care-youth-brief/challenges>

Child and Youth Connections:

Results From CFSR Round 3 (2015–2018)

Key Takeaways for Children’s Connections With Extended Family, Community, Culture, School, and Friends

There needs to be an increased focus on identifying and maintaining important connections for children in foster care to facilitate a sense of belonging, normalcy, and well-being.

Specific strategies for supporting children’s connections with extended family, community, culture, school, and friends include:

- Working with children and their families when children first enter care and on an ongoing basis to identify children’s important connections
- Identifying funding mechanisms and additional supports to ensure that children in foster care can continue to participate in the same extracurricular activities as they did before entering care
- Targeting neighborhood recruitment of resource families so children placed into foster care can remain in their communities
- Partnering with schools to ensure that children in foster care are able to remain in their schools of origin even when placed outside of their original school districts
- Working with resource parents to encourage their facilitating contact between children in foster care and extended family and friends

Practice strengths related to children’s connections with extended family, community, culture, school, and friends included:

- Ensuring children are in frequent contact with relatives
- Taking steps to support children celebrating birthdays, holidays, and cultural events with extended family
- Efforts made to keep children in their same schools or to provide transportation if children were placed outside of their school district
- Caseworkers and resource parents maintaining children’s attendance at faith-based services, activities, and gatherings
- Caseworkers and resource parents arranging for children to maintain contact with the friends they had before they came into foster care, by securing transportation for children and promoting ongoing phone and/or social media contact
- Caseworkers and resource parents facilitating children’s continued participation in community-based activities, by encouraging children’s interests and

providing transportation or funding, such as for after-school clubs and community sports teams (e.g., basketball, soccer)

Practice concerns related to children’s connections with extended family, community, culture, school, and friends included:

- Caseworkers not spending time with the child and family to identify the child’s cultural heritage, interests, and important connections



Child and Youth Connections:

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- Efforts not made to ensure children were able to spend time or communicate with their friends
- Efforts not made to try and facilitate children remaining in the same school after entering foster care
- Tribal cultural connections not maintained for children after they entered foster care

Conclusion

Preserving and promoting children's connections is imperative. Children need healthy, stable relationships to promote permanency and well-being. The Round 3 results of the CF SRs support the conclusion that frequent and quality unsupervised family time is important for children's connections. Furthermore, supporting parents' participation in their children's activities and encouraging parents' involvement in everyday parenting routines and decisions help to keep children and parents connected to one another. Utilizing relative caregivers also promotes children's connections with siblings, parents, family, friends, and the community.

It is imperative that child welfare systems preserve and promote opportunities for children to be connected to their families and communities.

System-wide change is needed to ensure that children remain connected to those who are important to them. The Children's Bureau encourages child welfare agencies, Court Improvement Programs (CIPs), the judicial and legal communities, and other stakeholders to review the research, best practices, funding sources, and recommendations related to providing family time, and work together to ensure that frequent quality family time is provided consistent with child safety. Activities to achieve this include, for example:

- Actively focusing on recruiting maternal and paternal relatives as resource parents in the communities from which children come
- Revisiting the option of placing children with relatives after they were originally placed in non-relative resource homes



- Arranging opportunities for children to see their parents and siblings outside of family time (e.g., ensuring children are able to attend family gatherings and cultural events; facilitating parents' participation in children's everyday activities)
- Never using family time as a reward or punishment, as such practices are inconsistent with federal law and are harmful to the well-being of children and parents
- Listening to children and families to understand children's connections
- Addressing challenges that interrupt connections, such as transportation issues, lack of funding to support connections, and the culture of child welfare systems that do not prioritize maintaining connections

Children, youth, and families need to have their voices heard about important connections that need to be maintained while the child is in foster care.

It is necessary for state child welfare systems to continually implement and evaluate approaches to help children develop and maintain important connections. Currently, states are engaged in program improvement planning and implementation to improve outcomes for children and families. Many of the plans include aspects of caseworker practice related to preserving and promoting children's connections with parents, siblings, extended families, communities, cultures, schools, and

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friends. However, other casework practices and systemic issues can result in challenges to preserving connections, such as not jointly developing written case plans with children and their parents to identify children’s important connections, not providing as much unsupervised family time as possible, and making insufficient efforts to recruit resource parents for children needing foster care placement.

Often, when agencies seek to engage children, youth, and families, it is without acknowledging the power dynamic between the agency and those who are experiencing the child welfare system. It is important to recognize the implicit biases that may exist within the child welfare system that may stand in the way of full family and youth engagement. Biases can also affect if and how parents’ input is solicited and valued, creating a culture of protecting children from their families rather than working with families to build capacity to protect and care for their children. Without addressing such biases, it is difficult to change the culture or system to allow for family and youth voice to be heard and honored. While trying to make decisions in the best interests of those involved, we may also inadvertently and unintentionally disempower families and youth if decisions are not made in consultation with them. When the courts are involved, the disempowerment that families and youth experience may be magnified.²⁹

These challenges highlight how state child welfare systems would benefit from listening to families and prioritizing children’s connections by implementing strategies at both the practice and systemic levels. Throughout this report, examples of state child welfare system strategies to preserve and promote the connection of children and parents through practices and initiatives are highlighted. More recommendations are included in [ACYF–CB–IM–20–02](#), and the “Additional Information and Resources” section here.

Additional Information and Resources

ACF Children’s Bureau Information Memorandum ACYF–CB–IM–20–02, “Family Time and visitation for children and youth in out-of-home care.” (2020): <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im2002.pdf>

Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/child-welfare-systems/>

Child Welfare Information Gateway: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/planning/connections/>

Developmental Issues for Young Children in Foster Care by the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care (2000): <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/106/5/1145.full.pdf>

Evidence Base for Avoiding Family Separation in Child Welfare Practice: An Analysis of Current Research (2019): <http://www.thetcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Alia-Research-Brief-2019.pdf>

Georgia Family Time Practice Guide: A Guide to Providing Appropriate Family Time for Children in Foster Care: <http://www.gacip.org/family-time-practice-guide/>

Tools to Build Birth and Foster Parent Relationships: <https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bfpp/>

Visitation: A Practice Guide to Support Lasting Reunification and Preserving Family Connections for Children in Foster Care (Minnesota): <http://www.centerforchildwelfare.org/kb/permanency/Child%20and%20Family%20Visitations%20Practice%20Guide.pdf>

Visitation with Infants and Toddlers in Foster Care: What Judges and Attorneys Need to Know, by the American Bar Association (2007): http://www.ct.gov/ccpa/lib/ccpa/birth_to_three_and_visitation_aba_child_law_center_doc.pdf

²⁹ Children’s Bureau. (2019, August 1). *IM–19–03. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1903.pdf>