Resource Parent Handbook

Shared Parenting

The Shared Parenting Model

Shared parenting is unique to each family's circumstances and some birth families will be more receptive than others.

Consistent messaging from adults provides all children a sense of security and structure that allows children to be children. When they hear uniform messages on a regular basis, there is less confusion about rules, boundaries, or expectations.

Your relationship with the birth parents gives the child permission to accept your nurturing love without feeling disloyal to their birth parents. The more open you are to developing a trust-based relationship with the birth parents, the more you can show the child in your care that their natural love for their parents is safe and respected.

The ideal CFSA shared parenting model encourages direct and regular communication between the following caregivers:

(1) birth parents and kinship resource parents;
(2) birth parents and non-relative caregivers (resource parents);
(3) kinship resource parents and non-relative resource parents; and
(4) current resource parents and prospective resource parents (if applicable during a planned placement move).

Under all circumstances, shared parenting is a team approach that emphasizes listening and learning, sharing information, collaborating for joint decision-making, and keeping the children's best interests always at the forefront of your conversations.

The key approach to shared parenting is mutual respect and a desire to build bridges.

Shared parenting can increase a child's sense of safety while decreasing a child's feelings of loss and extreme trauma. Shared parenting may also help to increase placement stability and positive permanency outcomes.

Suggestions for Shared Parenting

Remember! For most of these steps, small or large, you need to wait until trust has been built between you and the parents. Even after you have established a relationship of mutual trust and respect, the shared parenting role needs to be approached with delicacy and care. Put yourself in their shoes!

Small Steps

- Check with the social worker to ensure there are no restrictions to texting, emailing, or phoning the birth parents with updates about the child's daily activities and adjustments.

- Ask the birth parents about the child's favorite foods, favorite activities, and routines as well as any other suggestions they may have to help their child to feel more comfortable in your home.

- Consider using the same medical health team that the birth parent has chosen for the child (i.e., pediatricians, dentists, etc).

- Speak neutrally or positively about a child's birth parent. If the child expresses anger about something their birth parent has done, or not done, listen and comfort but do not add any criticism or negativity.

Medium Steps

- Plan some regularly scheduled conversations with the birth parents to build more consistent communication.

- Make sure the birth parents know the child's medical appointments or parent-teacher conferences; ask the social worker if they are available to offer transportation to be sure the birth parents attend with you; talk with the birth parents about any follow-up steps and defer to the birth parents for who should take the lead for any of those steps.

- Invite the birth parents to go with you to attend a CFSA or other community family activity.

- Involve the birth parents in the child's daily life. For example, FaceTime or Zoom, to allow them to applaud their child's achievements or to cheer up their child if he or she is having a hard day. For more practical purposes, ask the birth parents to help virtually with homework, etc.

Larger Shared Parenting Steps

- Plan fun or special events together (like the child's birthday party).

- Invite the birth parents to attend your family events or activities to spend social time with their children. These events might include outings, family gatherings, and religious observations.

- Let the birth parents know you would be honored to attend their family events or activities, including outings, family gatherings, and religious observations.

- Invite the birth parents into your home to engage with the child in person, perhaps to help with homework, creating recipes, house projects, etc.

- Consult with the social worker or RPSW before offering to mentor or coach birth parents. If such an offer is agreeable, please be respectful of the birth parents' boundaries when offering guidance and remember that there can be more than one "right way" to parent.

Please let the social worker know of any shared parenting activities that you are doing and how they are going! What works well? What needs changing to work better? Especially if you are having visits with the birth family in your home, the social worker will need to document this information in their records.

Conflict Resolution and Shared Parenting

Sometimes, when conflicts surface, bringing in a third person is helpful. A third party offers a different point of view and can share new communication styles. They can suggest a way to reframe the family situation, set different boundaries, and even offer conflict resolution skills. Ideally, this third person is not another relative nor an Agency staff member. The person might be a faith-based counselor or an independent licensed family-based therapist.

Initiating Shared Parenting

When a child in CFSA care joins a kinship resource parent or non-relative caregiver, the child's parents naturally feel a range of emotions. Some emotions might include feelings of shock, despair, fear, shame, guilt, and even resentment. Many reactions are possible, but, ideally, birth parents will focus on how to maintain their pre-existing bonds with their child. To do so, they may seek a connection with you.

To genuinely establish a shared parenting connection, you may need to initiate the engagement of the birth parents. **Note:** If there is a safety reason or some other barrier to your engagement with a birth parent, the child's social worker is responsible for letting you know about limitations with communication.

In some cases, the birth parent may not be available, due to hospitalization, incarceration, or living in another jurisdiction, etc. As a resource parent, you can choose to create and maintain meaningful connections with other family members as a bridge for the child. The child's social worker can talk with you about how you can best support such contact with relatives, friends, and others who were part of the child's life before they came into your home. In fact, even if the parents are around, helping the child maintain previous healthy and nurturing bonds also helps the child's overall well-being.

As time passes, you will get to know the child better and better. Just remember that in almost every instance, *the birth parents still know more about the child than anyone else on the team.* So, the more you can demonstrate your genuine respect for the birth parents' knowledge of their own child, the more likely they will be open to the essentials of the shared parenting process.

Remember! Almost every child will continue to love and want to be with their birth parents even after the child has experienced the trauma of maltreatment. Understandably, you may struggle with this knowledge. As best as you are able, please take responsibility for respecting the birth parents. Challenge your own personal feelings and judgments.

Children and birth parents BOTH need to spend quality time visiting together!

A note about visits - the social worker and the child's assigned guardian *ad litem* may ask if you are interested in supervising the parent/child visits. If you are able to help with transportation to, facilitation of, or supervising visits with the child, these efforts can go a long way in establishing trust.

As birth parents make strides towards case goals, including compliance with court orders, they often become more confident about their case and the child returning home. They may decide they do not need to maintain their bond or even continue co-parenting with you. Try not to take this personally.

They are simply finding their way from separation to reunification the best way they know possible. Likewise, they may just "click" with you, asking if you would like to continue to be part of the child's life after reunification. You may become extended family, attending events, providing baby-sitting, respite, etc.

Shared Parenting with Kinship Families

Even after a child in CFSA care joins your home, the Agency will continue to seek relative placements throughout the life of the child's out-of-home case. If the Agency does locate a viable kinship family for placement, the Agency will vet and license the family.

You can set the tone for a smooth, thoughtful, and less stressful move for the child by beginning to build the same relationship of mutual respect and support with the kinship parent as you have with the birth parents. The social worker and your RPSW will encourage you to engage with the kinship caregivers and initiate shared parenting prior to the child's move. The engaging process might also include an Icebreaker meeting.

If you have not had an Icebreaker with the kinship family, but you think it would be helpful, please discuss scheduling one with the assigned social worker or reach out directly to the Kinship Unit at cfsa.kinfirst@dc.gov.

Resource Families and Re-Placement Resource Families

Prior to the child achieving permanency, there may be a time when you, as a resource parent, will give the Agency notice that you are no longer able to care for a child in your home. Whatever the reasons for the child needing to move to a new resource home, your shared parenting role will now require you to communicate information that you previously needed. The Agency hopes that you will share as much information as you have to provide the new resource family with the knowledge to ensure the child's sense of safety and to decrease the trauma of another move as much as possible.