



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

How can parents and caregivers be supported in **developing a positive co-parenting relationship?**

Removing children from their home and placing them with foster or kinship families can be [traumatic for everyone involved](#). When parents and caregivers¹ work together in a co-parenting relationship, it can minimize this trauma, ensure children have the best possible support, and help families move toward reunification. [A summary of the research shows](#) the benefits of co-parenting for facilitating contact between the children and their parents, and nurturing children's sense of well-being and belonging. A child protection agency plays an important role in establishing a culture and practice of implementing policies to nurture these relationships. Caseworkers must commit to establishing trust with parents and caregivers through ongoing and honest communication. All parties should work to be transparent and collectively create a network of support for the children and their families.^{2,3}

Establish trust

For parents to [consider a co-parenting relationship](#), they must trust the child protection agency, their caseworker, and the caregiver. Many parents do not have that trust, believing that the child welfare system works against them and that the primary goal is family separation. These fears are reasonable given the [history of child welfare](#), which often had the [explicit aim of removing children from their families](#), particularly children of color and children living in poverty.⁴ These historical



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roots continue to manifest in today's child welfare system and, along with bias and systemic racism, contribute to [disproportionately high](#) rates of Black and Native American children being removed from their homes and, as a result, an ongoing lack of trust in the system among Black and Indigenous communities and families. Even before the child protection agency becomes actively involved in a family's life, many parents have witnessed the negative impact of the child welfare system in their community over many generations and have built up emotional walls that are hard to overcome.

Clarity about the role of the caregiver also is critical. Foster caregivers should be told during the recruitment process that they will be expected to work with the family — including and especially the parents — to support the child, with family reunification as the priority. Taking a strengths-based approach to building these relationships is helpful, such as the [Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors Framework](#) adopted by the [Birth and Foster Parent Partnership](#).

“The way that we train foster parents to be prepared to have a relationship with the parent is really important because you can see that most foster parents, if you can get them on the right track of wanting to work with parents on behalf of the child, they will,” says Ali Caliendo, founder and executive director of [Foster Kinship](#).

To further build rapport and trust, caseworkers should facilitate early and frequent opportunities for engagement between caregivers and families. In **New York City**, [Rising Ground launched a pilot co-parenting program](#) in 2020, hiring a therapist as a full-time facilitator to help parents get acquainted with their child's caregiver within the first week of placement,

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The **Strengthening Families** approach supports co-parenting by elevating five protective factors:

1. **Parental resilience.** By offering one another encouragement and support, parents and caregivers can better see their own — and each other's — personal strengths.
2. **Social connections.** Developing a strong relationship can help parents and caregivers develop a support network and prevent isolation.
3. **Knowledge of parenting and child development.** Through formal and informal educational opportunities, parents and caregivers can gain knowledge of practical parenting approaches.
4. **Concrete support in time of need.** Parents and caregivers can share their knowledge about available community resources.
5. **Social and emotional competence of children.** When parents and caregivers work together in a supportive co-parenting relationship, it helps foster emotional security for the child.

with the goal of supporting the child's transition, reducing parental stress, and expediting reunification. Other strategies include introducing the parents and caregivers through an initial “comfort call” or in-person icebreaker meeting, facilitated by the caseworker. North Carolina's [shared parenting policy](#) offers parents

Parents have to be able to trust the system and trust the case manager, as well as the caregiver, because you hear so many times that ‘You just want to take my kids.’ When you go into a relationship like that, they’ve already built that wall and you are trying to get past that.

— VICTORIA GRAY,
FOSTER AND KINSHIP CAREGIVER, ARIZONA

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the opportunity to meet with the caregiver within 48 hours of the child being removed from the home, which also gives the caregiver the opportunity to ask the parents questions about the child. Through regular meetings that the caseworker initially facilitates, parents and caregivers can establish healthy and trusting relationships. Whenever possible, the child also should be involved in meetings to help establish trusting relationships, as age and understanding allows.

Another way to build trust is to ensure that parents are meaningfully engaged in the permanency planning process. Parents should be co-designers of the plan for their family so that the goals, expectations, and supports provided are meaningful, timely, and clearly understood. Support should be provided so that parents are successful in meeting the requirements of the plan. Peer support mentors, such as [parent partners](#), can often help parents build trust by explaining expectations clearly and helping them navigate any misunderstandings or disagreements. Setbacks should be seen as opportunities for learning, not punishment. Parents cannot trust the caregiver or caseworker if they fear that the slightest mistake will be met with the harshest punishment.

Strengthen communication

Along with trust, ongoing communication is key to successful co-parenting. It is important to consider the [language and words](#) used, particularly in meetings and in court. There are many technical phrases and acronyms used in child welfare, and families may feel intimidated by such language. Some of the terms used may even be hurtful to parents. Avoiding child welfare jargon, using respectful language, and asking parents if they have preferred terms or names are some ways of being more inclusive. Tone and context are also important, and everyone, including the child when

developmentally appropriate, should be invited to speak up if they do not understand what is being said.

Agency culture must support communication between the parent and caregiver, and communication must be considered an essential element in working together. The [Quality Parenting Initiative \(QPI\)](#) is an approach focused on building relationships and making sure all children have access to excellent parenting through committed, developmentally informed relationships with caring adults. Through QPI, many jurisdictions are prioritizing co-parenting and meaningful relationships between parents and caregivers as a critical strategy. Launched in 2008, QPI has [expanded to more than 80 jurisdictions in 10 states](#), including Louisiana, where [comfort calls and icebreaker meetings](#) have been implemented statewide to help establish a relationship between parents and caretakers.

In **Texas**, working with parents and caregivers to support co-parenting is one of the core components of the [Safe Babies](#) initiative. Safe Babies acknowledges that 85% of brain development happens before age 3, and that ongoing communication and coordination between the parent and caregiver is critical to supporting children in their earliest years. The program helps coordinate services for parents to either prevent or overcome common barriers, such as lack of social supports, substance use, and mental health issues, providing training and technical assistance to child welfare stakeholders. Early outcomes indicate that Safe Babies helps parents feel more supported and increases permanency.

Caseworkers should be trained in cultural humility and authentic relationship building, and take the lead in establishing avenues for communication. By promoting healthy dialogue on personal topics that impact families — such as religion and family traditions — and making sure that parents and caregivers

Mistrust often results when people use big words and statements. Just make things simple so everyone can understand each other and everyone is on the same page.

— ROBERT BROWN,
FOSTER AND KINSHIP CAREGIVER. LOUISIANA

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maintain regular contact through phone calls, text messages, and/or visits, caseworkers will help build healthy co-parenting relationships. Caseworkers should encourage caregivers to be supportive of parents while they work toward reunification, and encourage parents to see caregivers as part of their support network so that they can continue their relationship even after the child returns home.

Caregivers also can directly support and improve co-parenting relationships by providing opportunities for ongoing parental involvement. Including parents provides them opportunity to share in moments that they would otherwise miss and might never be able to repeat. Simple actions — sending the parent a photo or artwork, or informing the parent of upcoming events such as school performances or medical appointments — can help nurture a healthy co-parenting relationship.

“It shows that you value the parent, you value their relationship with the child, you understand those milestones and how important they are for the child and for the parent, and you understand that it is the best thing for the child,” says Roberto Partida, a father and member of Casey Family Programs’ Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team.

Once a connection is established between the parent and the caregiver, the caseworker does not need to be part of every conversation. The central component in co-parenting is the establishment and maintenance of an open line of communication so that there are opportunities to develop the relationship over time,

LISTENING TO CHILDREN IS IMPORTANT

In working with families, it is also important to listen to the children and consider their expressed needs and desires. Older siblings and others who are important to the children should also be consulted. When working as a team, all voices matter.

learn where the other is coming from, and discuss how to best support the child. It is critical for the caregiver to realize that the [separation is traumatic](#) for the parent and understand the impact of that trauma.

Implement policies that prioritize co-parenting

Child protection agencies that implement [strong policies and practices that support co-parenting](#) can help guide the caseworker in nurturing the relationship while still ensuring confidentiality. Policies should reflect the importance of co-parenting throughout the child welfare continuum, starting with recruitment and licensing of caregivers all the way through to placement and permanency. Caregivers who do not share the agency’s value around co-parenting should be screened out. Those successfully recruited should be trained to understand that the desired outcome is permanency through reunification, and that co-parenting is an expectation of their role. Agencies

When we started the process as resource parents, I did not want to have a relationship with any of the birth parents. My personal belief was they did something wrong, and they did not deserve to get their kids back. What changed it for me was sitting in a room in the Department of Social Services for three hours with our now daughter’s birth mother — she told us her life story and I cried for three hours listening to her story. At the end of it, I realized we had one thing in common and that was that we loved the hell out of this little girl and we were going to do whatever we had to do to make sure she had a great life.

— MATT PENNON,

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COORDINATOR, ADOPTIVE PARENT AND FORMER FOSTER CAREGIVER, SANTA BARBARA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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need to be explicit and advance clear policy about the important role that both parents and caregivers have as part of the child's team and support network.

Engage fathers

When [fathers are involved in their children's lives](#), children experience improved outcomes. Yet child welfare and related systems often do not engage fathers and paternal relatives in the same way they engage mothers and maternal relatives. There is a common misconception that the role of the father and his extended family is secondary or non-essential. It is important to recognize that no matter the history or other factors, children have a right to know and have strong relationships with their fathers and paternal relatives.

Fathers are often informed late in the process about their child's case, leaving them feeling left out and as if they must try to catch up. Care should be taken to involve both parents from the beginning, and if a father must play catch up, child protection agencies should support him so he does not feel unfairly penalized. Fathers should be equally supported in co-parenting with the caregiver, and if the mother and father are no longer together, they should be supported in developing a co-parenting relationship with each other as well.

Work also is needed to combat persistent negative stereotypes and associations with fathers. The father may be judged for various reasons, such as his job status, his appearance, or a past that may include a criminal record. Fathers who are incarcerated may experience additional barriers to engagement even if they are imprisoned for [issues unrelated to child maltreatment](#). Child protection agencies have a role to

play in [making sure fathers can remain connected to their children](#) despite being incarcerated.

The [father's cultural background](#) may also make a difference in how he sees himself and how others see him, as different races and ethnicities have different expectations for fathers. Caseworkers and caregivers always should be sensitive to a family's cultural values and beliefs, and learn how they shape the way people parent. This is true for both parents but is often neglected when it comes to fathers.⁵

Support relationships with kinship caregivers

In some parent-kinship caregiver relationships, unlike relationships with non-kin foster caregivers, trust already may be damaged. It therefore is critical for caseworkers to find ways early on to rebuild that trust. Kinship caregivers may have biases against the parent because of the history of their relationship, and it may be hard for the caregiver to listen to or believe the parents. Conversely, parents might feel guilty about the situation that caused child welfare to become involved, and that guilt can be expressed in negative ways.

The child protection agency sometimes can make those relationships more difficult through the policies and expectations that are imposed, so it is important that the caseworker is supporting the relationship rather than causing more harm. Unless safety is an issue, rules that require the caregiver to bar the parent from their home, or to report the parent for trying to see the child outside of the established visitation schedule, can erode the relationship between the parent and the kinship caregiver. At the same time, kinship caregivers should be supported in maintaining

It would have been great if someone had taken the time to explain things, asked if I had any questions, encouraged me to reach out if I did have any questions because that's usually great when you can encourage follow-up communication. That rarely happens in some of our systems. It's like you show up, it is what it is, and then 'peace out'.

— EDDIE TORRES,
FATHER AND ADVOCATE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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reasonable boundaries with the parent, if necessary. The caseworker should affirm expectations with the parents and the kinship caregivers and make sure not to send mixed messages, endeavoring instead to keep the lines of communication open.

A key difference between kinship caregivers and non-kin foster caregivers is that the placement could produce anxiety for kinship caregivers as they consider how their relationship with the parents and the child may change. It is important for the caseworker to gauge the kinship caregiver's feelings about caring for the child and provide necessary supports. Connecting kinship caregivers with a [kinship navigator](#) or other peer-support resources can be helpful.

Even though kinship caregivers often already have a relationship with the parents and the child, the same strategies used to support co-parenting with non-kin foster caregivers can be adaptable. Comfort calls and ongoing communication provide opportunities for the parent to share information about the child that the kinship caregiver may not know, such as the child's likes and dislikes, how the child is doing in school, and any medical concerns. Sharing these important details can demonstrate the parent's support for the kinship

caregiver, which can have a positive impact on their co-parenting relationship.

Additional resources

- [Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: Matrix of Birth and Foster Parent Strategies](#) provides strategies to help parents and caregivers work together to facilitate reunification.
- [CHAMPS Policy Playbook](#) shares recommended policy approaches, special considerations, and examples of existing policies and programs for supporting co-parenting.
- The [Partnering with Birth Parents in Foster Care](#) episode of the [Creating a Family Podcast](#) provides recommendations for helping caregivers build relationships with parents.
- [The F Word: Foster Care – Parent's Voice: Brittany's Reunification and Parent Partnership](#) is a podcast episode that shares the story of a parent and her partnership with her children's foster caregiver, and their journey to reunification.
- [The Imprint](#) has articles on co-parenting, including: [Co-Parenting Gets Children Home from Foster Care Safer and Faster](#).

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 For the purposes of this brief, caregiver means a person who provides care either by foster care or kinship care arrangement.
- 2 Content of this brief was developed with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team during meetings and interviews throughout 2022. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in the child welfare system, and who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Team members who contributed to this brief include Robert Brown, Rimy Morris, Roberto Partida, and Victoria Gray.
- 3 This brief also was informed through interviews with: Matt Pennon, adoptive parent and former foster caregiver, County of Santa Barbara, on September 6, 2022; Ali Caliendo, Founder & Executive Director, Foster Kinship, on September 8, 2022; and Eddie Torres, advocate and parent with lived experience in the child welfare system, on October 14, 2022.
- 4 Raz, Mical. *Abusive Policies: How the American Child Welfare System Lost Its Way*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- 5 Institute for Research on Poverty. (March 1, 2023). [Recognizing the Diversity of Fathers and Families in Child and Family Services](#). YouTube video.

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