

Recommendations for Using the *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide* for Child Welfare Agency Leaders and Staff

The *Birth and Foster Parent Partnership: A Relationship Building Guide* offers practical tips to help build partnerships and strengthen communication between the important adults in a child's life while in care and after they return home to their families. The guide focuses on the strengths and protective factors of the birth parents and the foster/kinship caregivers and how they can build on them. Child welfare staff have an important role in introducing the guide and facilitating its use to help build respectful and supportive working relationships between birth parents and foster/kinship caregivers.

It is hoped that child welfare leaders and staff will find this guide useful in understanding and supporting birth and foster parent partnerships and also in recognizing their importance in setting the expectations and nurturing the relationships between these two important roles in a child's life.

Below are some recommendations for how child welfare agency leaders and staff may consider introducing and using this guide:

- 1. Orientation/Staff Meeting Discussions with Child Welfare Staff.** We recommend offering to child welfare staff a special orientation on how to use the *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide* to provide them with a clear understanding of its purpose and how to introduce it to birth parents, foster parents, parent partners and others involved with the child welfare system. Staff would have the opportunity to learn how the guide can be beneficial to use throughout the entire process: before placement, at the start of a placement, throughout the duration of a placement, during a placement change and after reunification. After the tool has been introduced to staff, we recommend that agency supervisors regularly use the guide in their staff meetings to engage in discussions about the importance of and the expectations of birth and foster parent relationships.
- 2. Foster Parent Recruitment, Orientation and Ongoing Trainings.** We recommend incorporating the tool into the training curriculum for new foster parents and also in ongoing in-service trainings for existing foster parents. The training can focus on providing the foster parents with concrete strategies as described in the *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide* on how to build and support relationships with birth parents from the beginning of the placement and while the parents are working toward reunification with their children. Staff may wish to consider co-training with a foster parent and a birth parent who successfully used the guide to help them build and sustain their relationship. The guide is a valuable tool for discussion with potential applicants interested in becoming new foster parents. Child welfare agencies can arrange for training on this guide to be part of foster parent's required annual training hours.
- 3. Foster Parent Evaluations.** Child welfare agency staff may wish to use this guide as an evaluation tool to assess how well the foster parent is working to develop and sustain supportive relationships with birth parents and assisting the parents in moving toward reunification. It can be useful when making final decisions to issue a license to foster parents and also during their annual licensing reviews.
- 4. Parent Partner Orientations, Trainings and Evaluations.** If a child welfare agency has a parent partner program, we recommend incorporating this tool into the training curriculum for new parent partners and also in ongoing in-service trainings. The training can provide parent partners with helpful strategies to recommend to birth parents to help them develop their communication with the foster parent, child welfare workers and other service providers, and also build their protective factors to help them move toward successful reunification with their children. Staff and parent partners may wish to consider co-facilitating these trainings together. The guide is a valuable tool for discussion with potential applicants interested in becoming new parent partners and can be used as an evaluation tool with existing parent partners to assess how well they are assisting birth parents in building relationships with the foster parents.
- 5. Initial Informational Training for Birth Parents Entering the Child Welfare System.** The child welfare agency may wish to offer group trainings on the *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide* to parents when they first enter into the child welfare system. The agency may wish to consider using a training team composed of a staff member, a

parent partner, a birth parent and a foster parent to conduct this training. It will be important to ensure that the timing for this training will work for the birth parents and that it does not become another unrealistic expectation for parents to complete. The agency may wish to consider providing credit to parents for attending this class as part of their required court-ordered classes and working with them to identify a time when they can attend.

6. **Training for Foster Parents and Birth Parents after a Child is Placed into a Foster Home.** Child welfare agency staff or a parent partner may wish to offer training on the *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide* to foster parents and birth parents together after a child is placed with a foster family. The training can help both of them learn more about the uses of the tool.

7. **Use of Tool for Continuous Quality Improvement Purposes.** This tool can be used by staff to periodically check-in as part of the agency's continuous quality improvement process to help identify progress in expanding relationships between birth parents and foster parents. On an individual basis, it may also be useful for a foster parent and a birth parent to formally re-visit the tool together periodically to evaluate how things are going in their relationship and to consider any needed changes or updates in their agreements.

There are numerous ways to incorporate the use of the *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide* into the child welfare system. It is important to introduce the tool as early as possible, while being mindful of a family's emotional trauma and uncertainty about a child or youth being removed and where he or she is placed. Using this tool to help build strong birth and foster parent partnerships is an important beginning step in creating a culture change leading to more effective policies and practices for children and families.

It is hoped that this guide may spur new ideas for policy and practice changes such as:

- Recruiting foster parents/kinship caregivers who are eager and capable of working in partnership with birth parents;
- Hiring staff who understand the importance of birth and foster parent relationships and are committed to helping facilitate and support them; and
- Providing information about and support for birth families and foster families/kinship caregivers on building protective factors.

Some child welfare agencies have advisory groups composed of staff, birth and foster/kinship caregivers with the role of helping the agency examine their current policies and practices and build on them or develop new practices to integrate this innovative birth and foster parent partnership approach. If an agency does not have such an advisory group, it may be valuable to develop one. The advisory group can be helpful in developing recommendations for promoting and disseminating the *BFPP: A Relationship Building Guide* to help increase understanding about the benefits of building birth and foster parent partnerships and the need to develop structures for the parents and staff who will be implementing this new approach. It is important that sufficient time and resources are allocated for the needed training and support for those using the guide.

For administrators interested in how they can best support important practice and policy changes that will lead to strong birth and foster parent partnerships and better outcomes for children and youth, please see a related document in this series, *Birth and Foster Parenter Partnership: A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation*.

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership Team is happy to schedule a time for a virtual orientation of the *BPNN: A Relationship Building Guide*.

Contact info@ctfalliance for more information.

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