



bridging the gap

Families
Working Together

DEFINITION AND RATIONALE

DEFINITION

Bridging the gap is the process of building and maintaining relationships and communication between the birth and foster families involved in a youth's life, or between the foster and adoptive families, with the goal of supporting family reunification or another permanency plan.

Bridging the gap is most often viewed in relation to the relationship and communication between birth parents and foster parents. The benefits of bridging can also be afforded to other families involved in the child's life, such as between foster parents and extended formal and informal family members of origin, between relative caregivers and the child's parents, and between foster parents and adoptive parents. In examining the rationale for bridging, these other relationships apply as well.

INTRODUCTION

Foster care is a very complex system that involves the needs and interests of many parties. Its purpose is to protect children and to support families in making the changes and in developing the strengths necessary to enable the children to be safely reunited with their families of origin. Even when the best services are provided, this system can negatively impact families, cause children to lose their identity and sense of belonging, and undermine the parent's confidence to work hard to overcome the problems that are germane to the child's removal.

The relationship and communication between the birth parents and foster parents can significantly impact the experience that the child and the birth family have in foster care. When the relationship is respectful, non-judgmental, and mutually supportive, all parents are able to do a better job. Such a relationship creates a climate that enables parents to redirect their energy from anger and defensiveness to positive action. Open communication allows for the exchange of information that helps the birth and foster parents in their respective roles and responsibilities.

While there are reasons why the child came into care, people add their own assumptions to the facts regarding the birth family and the removal of the child. It might be assumed that the majority of birth parents do not love or care about their children, or that foster parents care for children for financial gain or want to take children away from their birth families. These myths

and assumptions about each other are dispelled through direct contact and communication. Forging an ongoing, positive relationship between the parents allays the child's feelings of conflicted loyalty to the families. The child receives the greatest benefits when the two families maintain a lifelong connection.

The most difficult step in opening communication and developing a positive relationship between the birth and foster parents is apt to be the initial introduction of the two parties, who may be wary and nervous. That introduction can best be made by holding an icebreaker meeting facilitated by the child's social worker that is brief and well planned. While it is preferable to have such a meeting in person, some case circumstances may necessitate having the meeting by conference call or through correspondence. All participants need to be prepared for, and supported through, the icebreaker meeting. The introduction of the two parties early in the placement must be presented to, and viewed by, the parents as a normal and necessary part of the foster care process. Foster parents need to be open to meeting birth parents because this is helpful to the child and the security of the child's placement. They also need to understand that the social worker will, above all else, be concerned about everyone's safety and will not put anyone, including the foster parent, in the way of harm.

As change is brought about in child welfare practice to support children in foster care, their families, and their caregivers, a cross-system approach is essential. Public social service agencies, with whom legal custody of the children resides, work closely with private child placing agencies that provide foster home placements. Because it is not uncommon for a particular child to experience placements in both public and private agency foster homes, the expectations of how birth parents and foster parents will relate to and communicate with each other must be consistent across those agencies. Without that consistency, parents, social workers, and even children themselves experience confusion, frustration and disappointment. Bringing birth parents and foster parents together to work cooperatively in the best interests of children is a best practice that is embraced by the public and private agencies in Northern Virginia.

RATIONALE

The Impact of Removal of a Child from the Birth Family

The removal of a child from his birth family can be shocking, devastating, disruptive, and scary to the child and the birth family. The impact of a removal not only affects the child involved and his or her parents, but also siblings and extended family. There is an array of feelings, behaviors, and changes in every day life that can occur after a child's removal from his or her parents.

After a removal, the child can be disconnected from everything the child has known - the child's family, neighborhood, school, and doctor to whom the child has gone his or her entire life. There is a disruption to the daily routine such as the morning and bedtime routine, what chores the child is responsible for, what food is eaten, privileges, discipline, and having a private room or having to share a room. Even familiar smells are no longer there for the child. Most importantly, there is a disruption to the relationship and bonding between a child and parents when a child is removed. A removal can be an assault on a child's self-concept and self-

confidence. If a child is not a part of his biological family (i.e., not living with his family anymore), then who is he or she? A child may blame himself for the removal and take on a great deal of guilt. A child may suffer from fear of the unknown. When everything that is known is gone, how is the child expected to think, feel, and behave in a new environment? Education and medical treatment may also suffer due to the removal of a child from his or her parents. Delays in transferring educational and medical records, as well as verbal miscommunication (or no communication at all), regarding a child's educational and medical history, can lead to gaps in services. If a child goes through several placements while in foster care, these gaps can get wider and wider.

After their child's removal, parents will also be dealing with an array of feelings. Not only have they lost the physical closeness to their child and the opportunity to bond with him or her on a daily basis, they will also suffer a loss of power and parental control regarding their child such as how often they will see their child and what clothes their child will wear. Parents may be in shock or denial about what is happening to their family. They may feel angry. A parent may feel a sense of failure as a mother or father. Having a child removed can cause injury to the parent's sense of self and self-confidence. If the parent is not functioning as a mother or father to the child (i.e., not living with them and not making every day decisions for them), then who are they and what is their role now in their child's life? This can lead to a fear of the unknown, as well as confusion over their new role and what exactly they are expected to do. A parent may become overwhelmed by their situation, their feelings, and by all that is expected of them, as well as by the loss of their child and the way of life as they knew it.

What Children in Foster Care Need

Children who have been removed from their families of origin and placed in foster care, in addition to having all of their basic needs met, need to feel safe, secure, and need to stay connected to their family of origin. A child can stay connected to his or her family through letters, telephone contact, and most importantly, regular face-to-face visits. When safe and appropriate, a child needs to see and talk to his or her parents in order to be assured that they are all right. A child needs to see and talk to them in order to maintain or repair their relationship and to continue bonding. A child needs to see and talk to the parents in order to make their transition back home easier. A child needs to see and talk to them in order to continue to express love and affection for them, as well as to receive their love and affection.

A child who has been removed from a family of origin and placed in foster care needs permission to continue to love his or her biological family. The child needs his foster parents and social worker to present with non-judgmental attitudes toward the child's parents. A child needs the foster parents to understand and be aware of the child's daily routine when the child was with his biological family, the family's traditions, and the family's beliefs and values. He needs the foster family to respect these things and be considerate of them.

A child who has been removed from a family of origin and placed in foster care needs to see his biological family and his foster family connect in a positive way. The child needs to see them united in order to feel safe and secure, and in order to not feel guilty about his or her relationship with either.

A child who has been removed from a family of origin and placed in foster care needs some personal belongings to keep when living in unfamiliar surroundings. Personal items such as a teddy bear, a favorite blanket, clothes, favorite CDs, and pictures of family and friends can be helpful to a child when the child is suffering from feelings of loss, or is scared of what tomorrow may bring. A child needs personal items simply to keep in touch with who he or she is.

A child who has been removed from a family of origin and placed in foster care needs uninterrupted educational services and medical and mental health treatment. A child should not miss one day of school or do without special education accommodations for which the child has been found eligible. There is no reason a child should fall behind in school due to missing information. There is no reason a child should not be treated for a chronic medical or mental health condition, or fall behind with annual physical and dental examinations, or therapeutic services, due to missing information.

Whether a child has been removed from a family of origin and placed in foster care is returning home to that family or is being adopted, continuity is needed in that child's life. In order to feel safe, secure, and confident, the child needs to know that the adults in his or her life are also feeling safe, secure, and confident. Direct communication and respectful relationship between the family of origin and the foster caretakers of a child enable the birth parents to contribute their knowledge of their child in order to help foster parents do the best job possible.

What Parents of Children in Foster Care Need

Removal of a child from parents causes strong feelings of disempowerment for parents. At the point of removal, parents can very quickly lose self-confidence and a sense of connection to the child. Visitation between parent and child is essential to maintaining the bonds and the motivation to do the work necessary for reunification.

Parents need to be respected for what they know about their child and the positive things they have given their child. Negative attitudes about birth parents can make them become defensive. A non-judgmental, supportive approach toward a birth parent helps to bring out the cooperation in that parent. A foster parent is in an excellent position to positively influence the environment in which that birth parent must make difficult change. Appropriate communication and relationship between the birth and foster parents provide opportunity to acknowledge the expertise that birth parents have about their child and allows the parents to maintain their sense of dignity and position as a parent. To the extent that is practical and appropriate, birth parents need to continue to function in normal parenting roles (obtaining medical care, contact with the school, hair care, discipline, etc.) in order to maintain a sense of responsibility toward and caring for the child.

Parents need to know who is caring for their child and to know that the child is safe. Parents want to have a sense of the environment within which a child is living and who is influencing their child. Knowing these things helps to alleviate fear and anxiety. Good connections diminish feelings of competition with the foster parents.

What Foster Caregivers of Children in Foster Care Need

Foster or adoptive parents need as much information as possible about the child and the circumstances of his/her family in order to provide the best care for that child. Reports from Social Services records can give some of this, but the birth parents and extended family members are sources of rich information that might not make its way into formal documents or into verbal communication from non-family members. There is great benefit to knowing the history of the child in relation to areas such as mental and physical health, relationships with significant others, history of caretakers and separations from family, education, likes and dislikes, behaviors and temperament, etc.

As stated by a foster parent, "To know the parent is to know the child!" The imagination of foster parents can abound with inaccurate ideas about who the birth parents are, why they have certain problems and challenges, and how they feel about their children unless those images are checked against reality. The birth and foster parents need to see each other as human beings along with their strengths and shortcomings. There is no substitute for foster parents and birth parents meeting each other in order to dispel myths and feelings of fear about each other and to understand the child and his situation.

Both parties need to be reminded about the benefits of knowing each other and having comfortable communication and relationship. Foster parents may even be able to function in a mentoring, coaching, or modeling role that is helpful to the birth parents. When the relationship between the parties is positive or at least neutral, the placement experience is less stressful for them and for the child.

When foster parents have poured out their love, seen the positive growth in the child from their efforts, and bonded with the child, it is natural to want to stay connected with the child when the child leaves the foster home. Foster parents do not want the child to perceive the separation from them as abandonment or as another significant loss. When the relationship between the families is positive, there is a better chance that the foster parents will be able to maintain some presence in the life of that child and to continue to be a positive support to the child's family of origin.

Advantages of Bridging the Gap

From the **child's perspective**, the advantages of bridging the gap are:

- Opportunity to preserve sense of identity and history.
- Bonding and attachment to family of origin preserved.
- Enhanced self-esteem.
- Decreased sense of abandonment or rejection.
- Potential for increased contact with birth family.
- Two families to love and be loved by.
- Smoother transitions and decreased crisis and conflict.
- Visitation more easily executed and supported.
- Consistent messages from birth and caretaking parents.
- Foster parents seen as supporting birth parents in non-judgmental way.

- Reduced feelings of divided loyalties to two families.
- Support for birth parents in making an appropriate permanency plan, other than return home.
- Child's needs better met through collaborative relationships amongst families and professionals.
- Increased possibility of the foster family remaining in the child's life when the child leaves that family; meaningful relationships not lost.

From the **parent's perspective**, the advantages of bridging the gap are:

- Bonding and attachment to child are preserved.
- Feeling of being respected for what one knows about the child.
- Anxiety reduced from knowing with whom the child is living.
- Ability to share parent's expertise about child.
- Better communication and information sharing.
- Greater awareness of child's daily activities and lifestyle.
- Decreased feelings of animosity and isolation.
- Smoother visitation arrangements.
- Boundaries and roles clarified.
- Opportunity to benefit from role modeling and mentoring by the foster parent.
- Increased skills and confidence, which in turn increases likelihood of reunification.
- Goal of reunification remains real; promotes achievement of reunification or another permanency goal more quickly.

From the **foster parent's perspective**, the advantages of bridging the gap are:

- Better ability to understand the child's experience and, therefore, assist the child.
- Ability to gain accurate and comprehensive information from the birth family.
- Reduced discord between the families.
- Smoother arrangements for visitation.
- Opportunity to learn about the child's culture and ethnicity so that his or her identity can continue to develop.
- Easier adjustment for child that lessens conflicts.
- Feelings of competition reduced.
- Easier transition home or to another permanent placement.
- Lifelong relationship with child may be maintained.
- Participation as a team player with all the parties.

From the **social worker's perspective**, the advantages of bridging the gap are:

- Good communication and relationship create collaboration that reduces tension.
- Direct communication between parents makes the job easier.
- Visitation runs more smoothly.
- Better communication from functioning as a team.
- Reality of foster care is more evident to the birth parent if everyone is involved as a team .
- Issues can be addressed more effectively in a direct manner.
- Foster parent can serve as an advocate, mentor, or role model for birth parent.
- Morale booster when parties are working with each other and not against each other.

- Creates a trusting relationship that encourages cooperation.
- In the long run, can reduce the social worker's role as a primary coordinator, allowing the social worker to serve as a leader rather than as a constant mediator.

CONCLUSION

Although bridging the gap is not a new concept or new practice, it is important enough to the well-being of the child and birth parent and to the stability of the placement to be a standard part of the foster care experience for all parties. In order to have a positive and cooperative environment, everyone must be open to creating that environment. There is much to learn about how to take the small steps to achieve a helpful level of communication and relationship and about the many ways in which families can assist each other in the best interests of the child. Such an environment is a “win-win” for all of those involved.