



Family Connections Discussion Guide

Introduction

- **Welcome** everyone | Land acknowledgement
 - Prior to starting this discussion look up what Native land the meeting is being held on, so that you can acknowledge and honor that land prior to starting the meeting
- **Introductions** | Invite people to **share their pronouns** but don't make it mandatory
- Icebreaker or check-in (where are you mentally, physically, emotionally)
- **We're here today to talk about relationship building.** We all have relationships of some sort in our lives, so it's something everyone has in common. We're going to speak specifically about the ways in which we can each support relationship building that will ensure caregivers and parents are best prepared to navigate the child welfare system *together*, working collaboratively towards reunification.
- **Today we'll discuss:** 1) why relationships matter, 2) how to facilitate a shift in practice and what you can personally do to support this movement from your sphere, and 3) we will provide resources (research and resources for facilitating this work).
- **We want to take a moment to discuss language.** Words matter, and we want to be intentional about the language we use to describe families involved in the child welfare system. Traditionally, we referred to parents whose children are experiencing foster care as birth or biological parents, and those providing the care for the children as foster parents. However, this language is evolving as we become increasingly aware of the impact and implications related to the words we use. We have heard from birth parents that they would like to be called simply "parents". Different jurisdictions are using various terms instead of foster parents, including resource parent, resource caregiver, and caregiver. It is also important to call out relative caregivers, as they serve a significant role in child welfare. For the purpose of this discussion guide, we will be using the terms parent and caregiver, however we recognize that the evolution of this language is ongoing and is not the terminology used by all individuals/organizations.
- **First, we'll watch a video** about two families who can give us insight into what this might look like. [Talk about Dezaray/Yvette/Yuvia and/or Grayson/Katie and Jonathan/Laura]. Then, we have some good discussion questions prepared to help guide the conversation.

Discussion Questions

[Note to facilitator – review the below questions in advance and select a question or two from each sub-category to explore as a group (depending on your allotted time). Ask the question aloud and then remain silent until someone speaks.]

Facilitating discussion about which relationships in our lives are impactful and why.

1. Our own relationships:
 - a. What are the relationships that are important to/for kids?
 - b. Who are/were the important people in your life/who impacted your life and were they family, were they not? Who is a part of your community now? Are they friends, chosen family, friends?
 - c. In Yuvia’s video, Dezaray says, “Yvette’s like a girlfriend, a mom, and my baby mama..” Was there a time in your life when you needed to build a relationship with someone or people with whom circumstances brought you together (professional workspaces, in-laws, fostering)? How did (or didn’t) that work out?
2. The relationships we saw in the video:
 - a. What were the meaningful relationships for Yuvia and/or Grayson?
 - b. How did their experiences vary/differ from what you typically see or experience in child welfare?
 - c. What stood out to you about these relationships? What if the parents were Black or Indigenous or Latinx – do you think there would be different challenges? And, if so, what might those look like and how could they be addressed?
 - d. What do you think Yvette has learned from Dezaray? What do you think Katie and Jonathan have learned from Laura?
 - e. How does Grayson benefit from seeing his birth mother, Laura, his Uncle Rob, and his “other mother” Katie and his father Jonathan spend time together – with both sides of the families?
 - f. How did you feel when you heard Katie Biron say, “It was really, really important to me to keep a mindset that he was Laura’s son, and not my son, until the day she relinquished her rights and we adopted him -- and then he became *our* son. And be ‘ours’ I mean Laura’s, Jonathan’s and mine.” ?
3. Challenges in relationship building:
 - a. Relationship building is hard no matter what --- fear is a natural piece of this. When you think about your most meaningful relationships were they always easy? What *makes* them meaningful?
 - b. How did Dezaray and Yvette build meaningful relationships through a system that is designed to dictate how they relate to one another? How can you imagine building a relationship within the confines of a system like child welfare?
 - c. What did you think when Jonathan said the close relationships his family holds with Grayson’s mother, Laura, and Grayson’s Uncle Rob were “unique” but that “they don’t have to be” for other foster, adoptive, and birth families?

Facilitating discussion about how we shift our own work and use our “spheres of influence” to help create positive change within child welfare.

1. The state of foster care and a vision for change:
 - a. What comes to mind when you think about a parent whose child is in foster care? What comes to mind when you think about caregivers (does this change if you use the words foster parent)?
 - b. Do you think the foster care system fails or succeeds more often? Why or why not?
 - c. Do you think relationships between parents and caregivers need to improve? Does this matter? Why?
 - d. What’s the goal of child welfare and how do these types of relationships work toward that goal?
 - e. How did the videos impact your perspective on what’s possible when it comes to relationship building between caregivers and parents?
 - f. What did you think when Yvette talked about feeling like she was “breaking the rules” by building a relationship with Dezaray?
 - g. Is this the way that every case happens right now? If so, how? And if not, what’s preventing this from being the norm?
2. How do we make changes to the child welfare system?
 - a. Caregivers play a critical role in helping keep children in foster care connected with their parents and other family members, building relationships with parents to support the child or children they all love and to increase the likelihood of reuniting families. Collaborative relationships between parents and caregivers support children’s positive outcomes in adulthood. What changes, within your own sphere or system, might be made in order to see more of these connections to support positive outcomes for kids?
 - b. What changes to the system might be made in order to protect more children? What changes might be made to keep families safely together?
 - c. Research has shown that parents and caregivers are afraid of building these relationships. Why do you think that is the case? (Possible reasons/examples: it’s unsafe, unknown, they don’t know how to do it, the system isn’t helping them do it)
 - d. How is the relationship between a caregiver and parent helpful?
 - e. What role does the media (news outlets, social media, TV shows, films) play in shaping people’s opinions about foster care and child abuse? How does the media tell stories of foster care, of kids in foster care (negative stories v. positive stories)? How does the media share or tell stories about parents whose kids are in foster care (and who are the people telling the stories: do we see/hear from those who are most impacted)? How does the media share or tell stories of foster parents and other caregivers, of social workers, case workers and advocates? Discuss what kinds of stories and portrayals you’d like to see shared in the media. How can we help media outlets and others tell a more realistic and nuanced story that reflects what it’s really like?
 - f. Discuss ways to involve entire communities in improving foster care. How can we all work together to improve or even transform foster care?
 - g. We know Black and Indigenous children are separated from their families at higher rates, and stay in foster care longer, than White children. How can we confront

institutionalized racism within child welfare and work to dismantle it through authentic relationship building between parents and foster parents?

3. Person/role specific questions:

- a. What is your sphere of influence? How can you personally support this work moving forward?
- b. What can you do, in your role to help build relationships (e.g. set clear expectations for all parties, provide permission to share information; encourage information sharing, ask about how information is being shared, offer to help, etc.)?
- c. How do you see your work (judge/attorney/case worker/parent/caregiver/advocate) shifting or changing to facilitate stronger relationships to support children in foster or kinship care?
- d. What are the practical things you can do to help? What are some of the barriers? If you don't have a family connections program, what can you do to work toward this now? How can you implement small change that works toward a culture shift where this is the standard?
- e. What can foster parents do to acknowledge and honor the culture, religion, race, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation or ethnicity of the child/children in your care if different from your own? And how do you see this work as extending to the relationship with the child's or youth's parents?

What we know (from research and feedback from families)

Would it surprise you to know that most parents and caregivers want to build these types of relationships, but that they're uncertain how or if they're even allowed? Think about what Jonathan and Katie Biron shared in their video: "There's an understanding that kids deserve to have connection. They deserve to know where they come from. But the huge gap is how...There's room to start small and then increase it as you feel more comfortable."

There is fear on all sides (the parents, caregivers – foster/resource/kinship parents, and child welfare workers) and it often gets in the way of building the partnerships our families need and children desire.

In a survey conducted by Amara with caregivers and parents in 2019, parents and caregivers alike indicated fears of being judged, not feeling welcomed/understood, and not knowing what to expect from being connected:

A caregiver said: "Preconceived notions by the bio parents that we (caregivers) are the bad guys and are out to take away their children."

A parent said: "Feeling like I was the bad guy and fear of being treated as if I didn't love my children."

They also expressed excitement to exchange information about the child.

A parent shared the following motivation: "The communication meant everything to me and those pics kept my mind focused, kept my path in recovery strong and my heart beating. I am so grateful to know he was happy and smiling."

A caregiver shared the following motivation: “Helping facilitate a bond and hopefully put the biological parent's minds at (some) ease that their children will be cared for, their roles as parents will be respected, knowing that we are a part of 1 team looking for the child/children's best interest, etc.”

The best way to address these fears is to share stories of successful relationship building. Instill hope that this is possible by sharing all the stories you have of how this works and why it matters. Relationship building takes intentional work and ongoing nurturing; the benefits are worth the investment.

Stereotypes about parents and caregivers influence everyone involved and have to be overcome for people to see the real love and caring that can occur when the child is at the center of a caring and collaborative team.

Transparency and honesty are important, as well as not blaming or shaming. [Stay strengths-based in communication.](#)

Modes of communication. The more direct the connections between parents and caregivers, the better it is for those relationships. As an example, emails can be misunderstood or read in a different voice than they were intended. However, when we meet in person or through video we have more cues to understand the meaning behind words, and these can help build relationship.

Removal/family separation is a traumatic experience for children and parents alike; **successful strategies center on skilled team members who build and celebrate these relationships from the beginning** and focus on creating a village to surround children who experience out of home care.

More information and resources

1. Videos made in partnership between Administrative Office of the Courts, Amara, and the Family Connections Program:
 - a. Yuvia’s story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdTyJU05Vqw>
 - b. Grayson’s story: <https://amarafamily.org/2018/10/graysons-story-a-foster-family-and-birth-family-come-together-2/>
2. More information about the Family Connections Program (TM) in Washington State
 - a. www.FCPWA.org
 - b. <https://amarafamily.org/programs-resources/parent-and-foster-family-connections/>
3. Resources for building relationships without a Family Connections Program (TM). (These resources are from the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership and can be found [here](#).)
 - a. Executive Summary [Tool](#)
 - b. A State and Local Leader’s [Guide](#) to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation
 - c. A Relationship Building [Guide](#)
 - i. Recommendations for Using the Relationship Building [Guide](#)