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6 tips to build your open relationships after foster care adoption

Mandy Taylor, foster and adoptive parent, and parent support specialist

When we adopted four children from foster care, my husband and I wanted to maintain contact with their biological parents, but we weren't sure how to begin. The agency had always defined when, where, and how we would have supervised visits.

From the time our children were first placed with us through foster care, we'd begun building a relationship with their biological parents. Beyond standard visits, we worked to build trust and keep communication lines open, demonstrating we wanted what was best for the children.

The same was true when foster care led to adoption, when maintaining that contact was up to us. This was tough to navigate, learning what would keep everyone safe without offending.

We've been through this process three times and worked through challenges over the years. What we learned can help provide structure for your developing relationship.

- 1. Clarify your openness.** This won't work unless you can accept that your child called someone else "parent" before you. We are "Mom" and "Dad" to our kids, but they have given their biological parents new, special names that honor their family connection.
- 2. Begin parent to parent.** Develop trust and rapport with the biological parent before introducing contact with the child. If confidentiality is required, contact could be mediated through an agency where no identifying information is exchanged.
- 3. Prepare for hard questions post-visit.** After a visit, kids may feel sad, wondering, Is she really OK? and they'll want to know when they'll be able to see their biological parent again. They often replay parts of the conversation, looking for meaning.
- 4. Children will have different emotional responses.** Kids sometimes struggle with guilt after a visit. If they're happy with their adoptive family, that can feel like they're betraying their biological family. Talk about those feelings and emotions: It's OK to be sad that you're missing them. It's OK to be happy you're here. It's OK to be loved by two families.

"When you stop expecting people to be perfect, you can like them for who they are."

—Donald Miller

5. Talk with the biological family about the child's emotions. When I've shared with the biological family how the child responds after a visit, they've been open to verbalizing supportive messages to the kids: It's OK to enjoy the things you're doing. I hope you will share those things with me. You can draw me a picture or talk to me about it.

6. Be willing to listen and learn. I assumed one parent was selfish for missing a visit until she told me later that some days saying goodbye again is too hard. "It reminds me of the last visit I had with my mother when I was in foster care," she said, "and I feel like a failure." Listening and learning from each other are key to building empathy.

Openness is possible in foster care adoption. I hope more people will give these relationships a chance.



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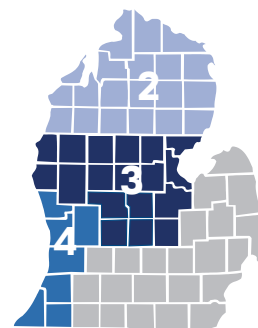
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