



Strategies to  
Increase Birth  
Parent Engagement,  
Partnership, and  
Leadership in the  
Child Welfare  
System: *A Review*

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# acknowledgements

## Acknowledgements

This report was a collaboration between Casey Family Programs' (Casey) Research Services and Casey's Technical Assistance Unit, as part of their ongoing work with the Birth Parent Advisory Committee. Information contained in this report draws heavily on previous research included in Birthparent Participation Programs (Clara, 2009), Engaging Fathers in the Child Welfare System (Garcia & Myslewicz, 2009), and Birth Parent Partnership and Engagement (Corwin, 2010).

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## Author

### **Tyler Corwin**

Casey Family Programs  
2001 8th Avenue  
Suite 2700,  
Seattle, WA 98121.

**E** [tcorwin@casey.org](mailto:tcorwin@casey.org)

## Executive Summary

### Overview

Birth parent participation and attendance in child welfare programs has been demonstrated to reduce the recurrence of maltreatment, as well as contribute to the reunification of families and improve emotional adjustment in children.

The report reviews the roles of birth parents in the child welfare system, as well as programs that foster birth parent engagement. It explores barriers and proactive strategies to engaging birth parents in child welfare services, developing connections between birth parents and foster parents, utilizing birth parents as agency partners that mentor and train other birth parents, and drawing upon birth parent experience in an advisory capacity at the organizational level. Specific program models that focus on birth parent involvement and their evidence-base (where available) are also reviewed; programs were selected for inclusion in this report based on constituent recommendations, prior reports, and extant research on birth parent engagement. Given Casey's objective of influencing the policies and practices that support safe, stable, and permanent homes for children, Casey and the Birth Parent Advisory Committee collaborated to produce this review.

### Results

*Birth Parent Engagement with Child Welfare Services.* Encouraging participation in parenting and prevention programs contributes to reductions in maltreatment incidences, the reunification of families, improved emotional adjustment in children, and the opportunity for birth parents to demonstrate responsibility. Institutional mistrust, the complex issues that families face (e.g., substance abuse, domestic violence, unmet basic needs), and practical barriers (e.g., transportation, child care) create a serious impediment to the engagement process. Strategies to improve the engagement of birth parents and families in the child welfare system include: early outreach to parents; practical assistance; building supportive relationships with peers, foster parents, and child welfare workers; consulting parents in the decision-making process around service provisions; and family-centered practices. The following programs are briefly reviewed for their birth parent engagement strategies: Family Group Decision-Making, SafeCare, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, and Signs of Safety.

*Connecting Birth Parents and Foster Parents.* Facilitating positive connections between foster parents and birth parents, regardless of whether the children remain in foster care or are reunified with their birth parents, can increase family connectedness, reduce childhood trauma, expedite permanency, and increase the likelihood of reunification. There are challenges to building positive connections, however, including: overcoming safety concerns for the child (for the foster or birth parents), jealousies, condescension from foster parents, and staff worries that the connections will increase problems and work. Building a Bridge, Parent Mentoring Programs (Washington State), Birth Parent-Foster Family Connections Project, and Icebreaker Meetings are reviewed.

***Birth Parent Partners.*** Birth parent partners, who have traversed the child welfare system themselves, possess the ability to provide guidance and support to other parents in the child welfare system and offer a unique perspective to inform policy and program implementation. Parent partners may increase birth parent engagement, decrease distrust in the child welfare system held by birth parents, and increase family support structures; they can also alleviate stressors between parents and child welfare agencies and may help improve child outcomes. Through alleviating stress for child welfare workers, the utilization of parent partners may have the additional effect of reducing child welfare staff burnout and increasing satisfaction. Birth parent partner programs reviewed include: the Parent Advocacy Program, Circle of Parents, and the Parent Partners Programs of Washington State and Contra Costa County, CA.

***Birth Parent Advisors.*** Birth parent advisors can help make decisions about program planning, shape agency policy, advise statewide committees, train child welfare agency staff, and advocate for parent partner programs. Successful birth parent advisory roles are dependent on agency flexibility, adequate information and support, directed meeting agendas, the provision of leadership opportunities for the birth parents, shared responsibility, and consistent involvement throughout the planning and implementation process. This report reviews Catalyst For Kids, the Child Welfare Organizing Project, Strengthening Families, and the Texas Parent Collaboration Group.

### Implications

Strategies for improving birth parent engagement, including reducing institutional mistrust through a supportive atmosphere where goals are clear and established and removing logistical barriers (e.g., transportation and child care), can be utilized to increase birth parent participation in the child welfare system. Creating positive connections between foster parents and birth parents, utilizing birth parent partners as support structures, and drawing upon birth parent advisors to inform how services are delivered, what programs are most effective, and how agencies and parents in child welfare interact, can contribute to reductions in the recurrence of maltreatment, the reunification of families, and improved emotional adjustment in children. These outcomes are especially significant as recurring incidences of child abuse or neglect have been linked to negative child outcomes, such as delinquency, increased behavior disorders, mental health issues, substance abuse, and reduced employment and educational achievement. Birth parents have a critical role in improving these outcomes.



# executive *summary*

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation whose work is focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building communities of hope for all of America's children and families. We work in partnership with child welfare systems, families and communities across the nation to prevent child abuse and neglect and to find safe, permanent and loving families for all children. We believe every child deserves a family of their own and a community of hope.

**P 800.228.3559**

**P 206.282.7300**

**F 206.282.3555**

**[www.casey.org](http://www.casey.org) | [contactus@casey.org](mailto:contactus@casey.org)**