

## Skills for Working with Birth Parents

In order for you, as a foster parent, to work effectively with the birth relatives of your foster child, some specific skills are important. Here are a few suggestions:

If the parent visits her child in your home:

- Be open and honest and explain your house rules to both the child and the birth relative. Consider their requests for changes whenever possible.
- Set fair limits and explain ground rules for visits clearly. Be firm and consistent about these limits to avoid manipulation by the child and/or the bio parent.
- Verbally reward change when you see it.
- Model appropriate parenting skills and techniques, along with appropriate child/adult interactions during visits.

Skills to communicate better with birth parents:

- Be non-judgmental.
- Understand that the parent may have never been parented in an acceptable manner and is reflecting what she has personally experienced when a child.
- Don't feel threatened if the birth parent(s) competes with you for the child's attention and/or affection. Many birth parents and relatives feel jealous of the foster parents, fear losing their child's love, or worry that the child will "forget all about me." Help them to understand that you are not competing with them.
- Help the birth family understand that you and the agency and the social worker(s) assigned to the child are part of a team. All communication between all of you must be honest. Don't "cover up" for the birth parent or relative, and don't defend the actions of professionals when they are not appropriate or helpful. Reassure the relative that s/he is also part of this team, working for the child.
- Share the child's developmental milestones - like that first tooth or the first day at school, or getting a job - with the parents. Provide parents with photos, drawings made by the child or small gifts that the child has chosen.
- Keep them informed of medical and dental needs, as well as progress in school.
- Show by your actions that you accept them as the child's relative(s) and honor the affection between them and the child.
- Remind parents that the child is upset when they miss visits or speak negatively about you. Focus on the effect on the child rather than on the actions of the parent(s).
- Tell parents you want the child to return to them, unless the goal is not "return to parent." While you love the child, the parents must feel they have support and hope in returning their child. Be genuine in your commitment to the goal.
- Stay calm and in control of your emotions.

Adapted from: *Foster Parents & Birth Parents - Working Together for the Children*  
([www.fosterparents.com](http://www.fosterparents.com))