



Fostering Extended Family Ties Between Resource Families and Birth Families in Tribal Child Welfare Practice

When circumstances prevent a child from living with their parents, the preferred option is for them to be cared for by someone they know. This usually means an immediate family member—a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or older sibling. It can also be someone with an established relationship or cultural connection to the child and their family.

Even when the child’s resource family isn’t an extended family member or someone in their life, tribal child welfare practices can help ensure that the resource family becomes viewed as extended family by the child and birth parents. And if the resource parent is not a member of the tribe, it’s also important for them to feel part of the tribe and connected to the community. When possible, it is in the best interest of the Indian child to ensure the resource family and the child feel a sense of extended family connection, history, and belonging to the tribe and community.

What does it mean to be extended family?

Extended family relationships are those where people look after one another and create safety, community, and well-being for the family and the child. The sense of belonging for the child, for the birth parents, and for the resource family is strengthened

when they have a shared belief that they are stronger together, that each person has an important role, and that they are interdependent. As extended family members, resource families remain connected to the birth family and they work together toward shared goals for the well-being of the child and the family. They have a role throughout the child’s life and bring value to the birth family.

In tribal communities, extended family members know each other, visit, and participate in group and community activities together. The goal is that when the child is an adult, they will remember each member as an aunt, uncle, mother, father, and someone who played an important role in their youth.

For resource families, acting as extended family members supports their role of ensuring that their Indian child experiences harmony among extended relations, which will foster a healthy sense of self and well-being into adulthood.

What does this look like in practice?

While fostering a baby boy, a foster mom and dad had the young birth mother come to their home on the reservation during the day. While there, the foster parents modeled how to care for a young child, especially how to soothe the child when he was crying. On the weekend, they had the young

father join them and taught him how to care for an infant too. The foster parents modeled how the parents could work together to take care of the baby without either of them getting frustrated and doing something to the infant that could be viewed as abuse or neglect. When the boy was reunified with the birth parents, the parents continued to come to the foster parents' home on the reservation to visit people who had become part of their extended family network.

Because of how the tribe trained and treated the resource parents, they truly saw themselves as extended family to the birth parents. They treated the birth parents as family members who needed guidance and help in caring for their child.

It takes commitment from both parties and development and support from the tribe to foster close connections like these. Core activities include:

- Being supportive of everyone's roles and importance to the child
- Communicating cooperatively with each other and with the child
- Actively visiting each other by phone, virtually, or in person
- Being mindful of important commitments
- Suspending judgment
- Remaining connected no matter where the child lives

How tribes can support resource parents taking on this role

To support the goal of having resource families feel and serve as extended families, tribes should consider policy changes, ongoing support services, and training for resource families—including on cultural

values—that help the resource family experience a sense of belonging and commitment to the birth family and the tribe.

Training for resource families

As you train new and continuing resource parents, you'll need to address the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in acting as extended family to birth parents.

Consider sharing the following information with families in training sessions:

- Your tribal definition or description of what it means to serve as extended family. Emphasize the fact that each family may have their own assumptions and understanding of what interaction with extended family looks like. Be clear about how extended family relationships look in your tribal community.
- Clarification of what is expected from resource families in their interactions with birth families. Be specific and give examples.
- Instruction in developing coaching skills and discussion of any expectations the tribe has for them to coach the birth parents.
- Tips about how to develop empathy and understanding for birth parents' circumstances.
- Current understanding of the impact of trauma, including intergenerational and historical trauma, and its effect on the behavior of both children and adults.
- Information about how to navigate grief and loss—the child's, the birth family's, and their own.
- The important role of visitation with birth families in maintaining familial bonds. Resource families should also be given guidance on how to engage birth families during visitations and navigate challenges that may arise.

- The positive impact that an extended family relationship has on the birth parents, the resource parents, and most importantly, the child.

A great way to convey some of this information is to include birth parents and youth who have experienced these extended family relationships in the resource parent training. Trainers can also include caregivers who successfully acted as a child's extended family.

Resource parents also need training that helps them understand the value of supporting the child's cultural development and sense of belonging to the tribe and the community. Even if the resource family is a member of the tribe, it's important to be explicit about the tribe's cultural norms and expectations. Topics might include:

- Tribal manners and values and how they affect how resource parents should communicate with the birth family, including how to navigate any conflict.
- Information about the specific needs of Indian children and families.
- Parenting practices common in the tribe's culture, and any expectations the tribe has for their resource families to maintain these cultural practices.

Support services

To best support resource parents' ability to act as extended family to the child and birth family, it's important to provide ongoing supports. Elements of a supportive program could include the following:

- Facilitation of the relationship in its early stages of forming. Make sure staff are available to assist with first meetings between resource families and birth parents.

- Sharing a calendar of community events that both families can attend, as appropriate, and encouraging them to attend together. Provide other supports as needed to ensure all parties can get there—such as assistance with travel—and address any potential challenges that might arise.
- Enabling birth parents and other family members to attend important events in the child's life.
- Providing mediation and assistance with navigating birth family relationship dynamics and other challenges that might arise.
- Providing education and support to help build the resource family's connection to and understanding of tribal customs and history if they are not members of the tribe. Tribes can invite resource families to community events and ceremonies, as appropriate—events that would normally be reserved for family.
- Advising resource parents on topics related to birth family visitation, especially on navigating children's behaviors that may be connected to birth family visitation. Supportive staff can help ensure that resource parents understand that challenging behaviors do not mean that the visitation is bad for the child.
- Offering enhanced support during periods of transition. Any relationship or role shift is challenging, and extra support may well be needed. Particular support may be necessary when a child reunifies, which is a success for the child but can feel like a loss for the resource parent.
- Offering peer support for both caregivers and youth. Tribes can connect newer families with experienced families who have successfully acted as extended family to birth parents.

How to ensure consistency in approaches to working with resource families across your tribal system

These are some strategies that tribes can take to ensure that the practices described above truly help to ensure that resource families feel like and serve as extended family.

- Offer staff training that is consistent with tribal values and emphasizes the extended family approach. Trainings could cover topics including:
 - Expectations of staff at all levels to foster the extended family relationship between resource families and birth families
 - How to view interactions with resource parents as an opportunity to help them act as extended family to birth family
 - Ways to support resource families being extended family and what that means for interactions with resource families
- Involve tribal elders in training and support of resource families.
- Share your overarching philosophy on how resource families should treat and respect birth families and your tribal definition of family/kin with staff and community.

- Identify any differences in approach for non-Native resource families or families who are not members of your tribe. Be clear with resource families and staff about why these different approaches are important to your tribe.
- Ask birth parents, resource parents, and youth about their needs and adjust services according to their feedback.

Tribes can design their programs for resource families in ways that maintain a sense of belonging and well-being, so Indian children are able to heal and thrive in an extended family. This will likely help all participants in the child's life succeed in their case plans, leading to more successful outcomes for the Indian child.

Find more resources for tribal child welfare administrators at the Tribal Information Exchange of the Capacity Building Center for Tribes (<https://tribalinformationexchange.org/>) and on the Adopt-USKids website (<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/category/open/for-tribes/>).

AdoptUSKids worked with tribal consultants to provide this information to help you, as a tribal child welfare administrator, support resource families in acting as extended family to the birth family is in the best interest of the Indian child.



AdoptUSKids is operated by the Adoption Exchange Association and is made possible by grant number 90CO1133 from the Children's Bureau. The contents of this resource are solely the responsibility of the Adoption Exchange Association and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau, ACYF, ACF, or HHS.

