

Navigating first family relationships: A discussion guide

This guide is designed to help support group leaders facilitate a discussion on navigating first family relationships. The term “first family” is used broadly and can include the birth family and any important person whom the child considers family.

Preparation for the meeting

- Because this topic can be an emotional one, this may not be the best topic for a newly formed support group. Schedule this discussion after a group has met several times, some trust has been established, and the group dynamics are clearer.
- Kinship caregivers, non-related foster parents, and adoptive parents will all have different experiences with first family relationships. You may need to adapt questions and the discussion based on your specific group.
- Revisit the existing group agreements and ground rules formed by this group and use them to support navigating emotionally challenging moments in the meeting.
- Remind members that their children’s stories (including their first family’s stories) belong to their children. It is important to share respectfully and with the understanding that the group is a place of safety and confidentiality. We share with purpose and only what is necessary. We share our stories to help one another learn.
- Discussions about first family relationships can easily take a negative turn. If that happens, it can be difficult for the group to get out of the negative mindset. As the facilitator, you want to help your group stay focused on how to make the relationships work and enable them to share their creative solutions to any barriers or challenges.
- Review the section, “Responding to challenges,” on page 3 of this guide. It may help you prepare to keep the discussion focused on developing positive relationships with children’s first family members.

Discussion themes

As you prepare for the meeting, consider these themes that you can bring up throughout the discussion:

- Even when not required, first family connection is an important element in the growth, trauma healing, and overall well-being of children who have experienced foster care and adoption. First family contact is most successful when it is viewed as a normal part of everyday family life.
- Working in collaboration with your child and their first family to create the most mutually satisfying relationships for all is critical to maintaining these connections. The more people that surround your child with love and commitment, the more positive their self-image will be and the deeper your attachment will grow. As you demonstrate a willingness and desire to include your child's first family in the new family you are creating, your child will be assured of their worth and safety.
- There are inherent power differentials between adoptive, foster, and kinship families and first families. This is especially true for adoptive families. Whether or not the child has contact with their first family is often entirely at the discretion of their adoptive parents. Adoptive parents need to be mindful of this power differential, and actively choose to share power with first family members so that the child can benefit from a healthy relationship between their first family and their adoptive family.
- Too often, we default to thinking that first family relationships won't be safe—physically or emotionally. It's important to think hard about whether safety is really an issue and, if it is, how to ensure it. Consider who gets to define what is and is not safe. Often safety is determined by white, middle-class culture, and these assumptions about safety are built around biases against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, and against people with less financial security. Remember that it can be emotionally unsafe, too, for a child to be denied relationships with important people in their lives.
- Relationships don't have to mean in-person contact. There are many ways to maintain relationships even when safety is genuinely a concern.
- First family relationships can be important even if a child didn't have an existing relationship, such as adoptees who were placed at birth or those who never knew a grandparent. Shared family history, culture, and community connections are vital when considering which relationships matter.
- What works at one time may not work later in a child's life. And what was unsafe for a younger child may be perfectly safe when they are older. Changes in contact and depth of the relationship will change over time. Be flexible as much as you can to benefit your child.

- It's important for parents and caregivers to give themselves grace for having negative feelings while working to move through those feelings. Help parents keep a growth mindset, while also forgiving themselves for past choices so they can move forward.
- Know that the ongoing commitment and trustworthiness you demonstrate for your child will have life-long effects. It's always important to not only think about the consequences your choices have for your children at their current age but also to anticipate what their needs will be as adults.

Responding to challenges

Review the information below before the discussion to help you brainstorm responses or solutions to barriers with first family relationships.

The child doesn't want contact.

- It's important to find out why they don't. Are they sensing conflict? Torn loyalties? Is the contact too much? Should it be remote rather than in person? Bear in mind that the child's wishes about contact and connection can and will change over time. Follow their lead, but keep the dialogue going.

First family members don't respond, don't show up, or don't want contact.

- Explore the various challenges that might be happening—transportation, feeling unsafe, feeling “less than,” mental health, or other issues.
- What messages—explicit or implicit—could you be giving the family?
- If it's the first parents who are not participating, who are other family members that can and will engage? Think about the importance of sibling relationships, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and those people that are like family, even if they are not biologically or legally related. Children have more than parents in their circle—include all those who are important to the child.
- Keep talking positively about the first family members, even if they are absent right now. Circumstances change, and you want your child to know that you welcome a relationship.
- This can be tough on the child, and it's understandable that a caregiver will want to protect them from heartbreak. Try to have a fun activity or treat planned that you can go to if a first family member doesn't come to a visit. Ensure the child knows that this doesn't have anything to do with this person's love for their child. Show your child how to have grace and be understanding even when circumstances are frustrating.

First family members don't comply with agency requirements, court orders, or other requests of the resource family.

- Explore if the requirements, orders, and requests are reasonable. Perhaps one solution for overcoming challenges is to advocate with families to change unfair agency obstacles. When children see both families working together, it improves their functioning and reduces feelings of split loyalties and betrayal.
- If it's not agency related, can you and the family look for answers on how to make it work? Can agency staff help?
- Get creative in maintaining relationships even when contact can't happen. People make mistakes. Relationships can be maintained—perhaps with different boundaries in place—when first families make mistakes.

The first family's location makes regular contact difficult.

- In-person contact is not the only option. Think about using Zoom or other video platforms, scheduling phone calls, or writing letters.

There has been drug or alcohol use by a first family member.

- General drug and alcohol use is often cited as a reason that a person is unsafe for a child to be around. However, with clear boundaries that are adhered to by all parties, this is not a safety concern. A healthy boundary for a relationship like this would likely include that the person needs to be sober while visiting with the child.
- It's important to consider our own trauma triggers that may arise when we know a parent has a history of substance use. Substance use that occurs away from you and the child may be unfortunate, but you can still maintain a relationship.

There was violent behavior in the past.

- As long as the child feels safe AND there is no threat at the moment, this is not a safety concern. Consider joint family activities depending on the child's age and circumstances.
- If there are safety concerns and the child still wants connection, be creative about how to support this, including Zoom or other video platforms, phone calls, and letters.
- Remember, people make mistakes. Some people make pretty bad mistakes, but those mistakes don't inherently mean that the child cannot have a relationship if healthy boundaries are maintained.

A child's behavior after contact is challenging.

- Try not to overthink the behavior. To some extent, it's typical for children to experience big emotions in anticipation of or after an exciting or emotional event. Prepare for ways that the child can blow off some steam. Often, planning a physical activity to follow a visit can be a helpful way to give the child an outlet.
- Help the child share some of their feelings related to the visit. It's best not to do this right before or after contact. But once time has passed, explore the following: Where do they feel the emotion? Do they feel like they have a tummy ache? Do they feel like their face or head is hot? Help them describe and name the emotion when they can so that you can jointly make a plan for managing those feelings.

You experience jealousy that your child still loves and longs for their first family even though they are being cared for by you every day.

- Give yourself grace for having negative feelings, while working to move through them.
- Remember that there is no negative to having more people love a child.
- Know that the ongoing commitment and trustworthiness you demonstrate for your child will have life-long positive effects.
- Cutting off a relationship with the first family will not prevent a child from loving their first family members and longing for a relationship. It can, however, harm your relationship with your child long-term and harm your child's well-being.

You have trouble navigating different values, rules, and customs between first and caregiving families.

- Discuss with the family and with the child how to best negotiate these differences.
- Think about how you handle differences between your parenting style and your parents, siblings, or friends. Likely there are differences there as well. Are you as critical with the people you are close to as you are with the child's first family?
- Look for areas of common ground and build on those.

You worry that the child will leave you to reunite with the birth family.

- Understand that when you or the first family create a situation where the child has to make a choice, everyone loses. Especially the child.
- When children know that they can have and keep all the relationships that matter to them, they don't feel the need to choose.

Basic scheduling challenges cause resentment.

- Family life is full and complicated. Open communication with the child and their first family is the best way to come up with workable solutions.
- Is the child busy with sports or other after-school activities? Include the first family in attending and cheering for your shared child.
- Are there multiple appointments that complicate scheduling? Invite birth parents to come to those appointments. This will also support their increased understanding of what their child needs to thrive.

Discussion

Today, we're going to talk about the important role that first families play in the lives of our children. We'll discuss the successes we've had in navigating these important relationships, and we will help each other with strategies and support for navigating the challenges.

Let's start by watching this 15-minute video together from Angela Tucker's *The Adopted Life* about a child named Neiko and how his adoptive family stays connected to his birth mother.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn0N3mb7tRc>

What are your reactions to this video?

Prompt:

- *Encourage participants to focus primarily on what Neiko gains as a result of this open relationship with his birth mother. What will he gain as he grows up? What challenges may he avoid?*

Every relationship looks a little different and evolves over time. Is anyone who has a relationship with their child's first family willing to share how it looks right now? What type of contact do you have (visits, letters, calls, none, etc.)?

Can you share some successes you've had related to maintaining first family relationships with the group?

Context:

During this discussion, ask more questions about how these positive experiences came to be. Explore if parents have overcome barriers or challenges to get to these successes.

How has contact helped your child or children?

Prompts:

- *They have a better understanding of who they are.*
- *They have a stronger sense of their racial, ethnic, or cultural identity.*
- *They have a less ambiguous loss, as they know how their first family is doing.*
- *They are able to have more questions answered about their first family.*
- *They have a better understanding of why their first family couldn't/can't care for them.*
- *They are able to be connected with other important people through their first family connection, such as fictive kin, extended family members, etc.*
- *They can tell more stories about their childhood because they are connected with people who knew them at a younger age.*

What challenges have you experienced related to contact with first families? How might you address them?

Context:

During this discussion, brainstorm solutions to the challenges presented. Use the preparation document to help respond to challenges and encourage others to do so. Keep an eye out for judgment between group members and remind people that each family is on its own journey.

What has surprised you most about relationships with first families?

Have any of you overcome reluctance to have contact with your child/children's first families? How did that happen?

Prompts:

- *Remember common ground. Parents who abused or neglected their child in the past often love them deeply and want what's best for them, just as we do.*
- *Overcoming judgment is critical. First family members were often victims of trauma themselves and often experienced the failure of the child welfare system to provide support.*
- *Prioritize our children's needs. Sometimes we as parents have to do things that are hard for us because it's good for our children.*
- *Focus on the future. Look for opportunities to give grace and look beyond past challenges. When we know better, we do better, and that applies to us as much as it does to their first families.*

- *Recognize when tough emotions are causing us to confuse comfort with safety. It makes sense that we want to protect ourselves and our children from hard emotions, but experiencing hard emotions doesn't inherently mean that the relationship is unsafe.*
- *All healthy relationships have boundaries in some form. If you're feeling uncomfortable, would working with the first family to form a new boundary help to improve the relationship?*

**What is your usual process for preparing a child for a visit with their first family?
What works well and what is challenging?**

Prompts:

- *What are some of the locations and activities you have tried for visits? What were the successes and challenges?*
- *How do you help your child prepare before and debrief after a visit?*
- *Have you included your child in making decisions about locations and activities? Have you asked them if they would prefer you be a part of the visit or not? Is there someone else your child would like to include to make them feel safe and supported?*
- *It's common for children to experience big emotions before and after a visit with their first family, especially if the child is in foster care. These big emotions can be a challenge to navigate as a caregiver and cause understandable concern. But those big emotions don't necessarily mean that visits should stop. How have others worked through this? For some specific examples about handling visitation, take a look at "Handout 1: Preparing for visits."*

What do children see and hear in your home that demonstrates acceptance of and positive regard for their first family members?

Context:

Words are powerful. They not only convey meaning but imply values, carry emotional content, and set the stage for future communication. How you talk about the child's family, even when they are not around, can demonstrate positive regard for them in your home. How you treat them when you are together will affect how the children feel about themselves and how they respond to their first family members. Long term, it will also affect if your teenage or adult child includes you as they seek relationships with their first family.

Prompts:

- *Photos of the child with family members are framed and displayed.*
- *Photos of the child with both families are framed and displayed.*
- *Photos of birth family members are included in photo albums or lifebooks.*

- *Foods, recipes, and traditions are passed along from their first family.*
- *Toys, clothing, or gifts given by first family members are visible and valued.*
- *There are discussions about the first family on birthdays, holidays, or other occasions. (“I’m thinking about your birth mom today.”)*
- *There are discussions about the strengths, values, and positive characteristics the child may have gotten from their first family. (“You’re a great storyteller, like your Grandma Jones.”)*
- *Include the first family as you talk about how proud you are of their accomplishments, in the same way you would an extended family member. (“Wow, AB honor roll! I’m so proud of you! We’ll have to tell your birth dad. He’ll be so proud, too!”)*

Resources

“Co-parenting or Shared Parenting”

<https://www.nacac.org/resource/co-parenting-or-shared-parenting/>

“Helping Children Connect with Their Birth Parents”

<https://www.nacac.org/resource/helping-children-connect-with-birth-parents/>

“Positive Interactions with Birth Parents as a Foster Parent”

<https://www.fosterfocusmag.com/articles/positive-interactions-birthparents-foster-parent>

Find more discussion guides and other resources for parent group leaders at professionals.adoptuskids.org/category/support-families/parent-groups

HANDOUT 1

Preparing for visits

While visits are not the only vehicle for engaging with the child’s first family, they are often key. They can be anticipated with both excitement and sometimes anxiety by children, first family members, and caregivers alike. Big or hard emotions from children around visits with the first family can often become a challenge for their caregivers and cause us to mistakenly believe that these visits are hurting them when they are not.

Make visits routine

Whenever possible, plan visits around routine life events. Every visit should not be in a sterile office (unless required by the agency or court order), nor should they always be seen as a special occasion. Visits that include making and eating a meal together, doing homework, attending a school event, shopping for school supplies, or even doing chores together provide great opportunities for both the first family member and the child to practice relating in everyday ways.

Inviting the first family to be a part of the child’s life in both routine and celebratory ways—with the adoptive, foster, or kinship caregivers—demonstrates respect for and commitment to the importance of these connections.

Help the child feel empowered

Visits will generally go more smoothly when you prepare ahead of time by anticipating and responding to questions the child may have, providing clear information about the who, what, when, and where of the visit, and teaching your child skills they can use during the visit if they become anxious or stressed.

Also, helping the child “rehearse” how the visit will go can help them feel in control. Here are some examples:

- Include the child in planning for visits—as much as possible, allow them to decide where visits will take place and what the activity will be.
- Consider creating and bringing a homemade gift for the first family. Doing this together is a clear message to the child that these relationships are important to both of you. This also conveys to the first family that they are respected and valued.

- Practice a simple breathing exercise they can do during the visit if they become anxious.
- Provide a soothing, age-appropriate item they can bring to the visit and hold or touch for security (a special bracelet or pocket-size items like a stress ball or shell works well for an older child or teen, while a stuffed animal or snuggle blanket might be best for a younger child).
- Help the child write up a list of topics they'd like to talk about during the visit or questions they'd like to ask. Practice responses to tough questions or painful answers, if there is reason to think some might come up.

Don't confuse comfort and safety

A child should *never* be forced to spend time with anyone who makes them feel unsafe. However, we, as the child's caregiver, can sometimes confuse **safety** and **comfort**. This is especially true if we are feeling uncomfortable with elements of the relationship with the first family member. We may be looking for problems or reasons why visits should not continue. Try to inspect your own feelings and acknowledge if this may be happening, giving yourself grace for navigating challenging circumstances for the sake of your child. Above all, remember that the child's needs come first.

Ask yourself the following questions to better understand your feelings and think about if a safety concern could actually be discomfort:

- Could I be making assumptions? (An example of this could be that the first family member smells of smoke and so you assume that they were smoking marijuana or they were at a bar before the visit and may be inebriated. An alternative explanation is that they had a cigarette before the visit because they didn't want to smoke around the child.)
- How do I define safety? How does the first family member define safety? Culture impacts how all of us interpret concepts like safety, comfort, and respect.
- Was a clear, explicit boundary violated? If not, do I need to adjust boundaries and be more communicative about a concern I have?
- Am I open to hearing the first family's explanations or opinions about the situation or have I already made up my mind?

Have a plan for after the visit

Depending on the child’s developmental age, needs, and feelings, each child may need different things after a visit that could cause big emotions. Some children will need to burn off energy, so planning a physical activity after visits may help them. Other children and teens may be emotionally exhausted after a visit, so they may need quiet time and space to themselves. They may also want to process or debrief any feelings they have about their visit, with you or with another trusted adult. Be available to talk about it, but don’t pressure the child to talk. Also, keep in mind that children process at different speeds. It may be helpful to wait a few days before revisiting their thoughts and feelings about the visit.

Overall, be led by the unique needs of your child, and remember that first family relationships contribute to your child’s well-being.



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