



# C ompleting the Circle

*Uncovering, Discovering & Creating Connections  
for Your Foster & Adoptive Children*



**Iowa Foster & Adoptive  
Parents Association**

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*The greatest disease  
is to be nobody to anybody.*

Mother Teresa, Humanitarian

### Lifelong Connections – The Stakes Are High

Children and youth of all ages, regardless of their needs and circumstances, long for loving lifelong connections to others. When children are placed into foster care, they all too often have lost not only their parents but also brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others who are important in their lives. Children and adolescents who move from foster home to foster home, hospital to residential care, and in and out of juvenile detention facilities are frequently lost and in crisis. They are young, alone, and lonely for a family, a home, a school with friends, and a neighborhood.

Without the stability of lifelong connections, children and youth are missing the needed guidance to prepare them for adulthood.

Unfortunately, many youth in foster care grow up and leave the system without any permanent, lifelong connections. They have neither the security of a family, nor the resources necessary for adulthood. They lack an essential network of relationships to rely on when the going gets tough, and they lack people to pat them on the back when things go well. For some young adults, they become part of the disproportionate number of former foster youth who end up in jail, lack job skills, face early pregnancy, and/or become homeless.

*I miss my Grandma...  
well, she's not my real  
Grandma, but I call  
her that. She used to  
be my Foster Mom,  
but she couldn't take  
care of me anymore.  
I haven't seen her in a  
year...can I see her?  
Am I allowed to?*

Current foster youth

As children grow and develop, a sense of identity begins to form. For many children, they gain this sense of identity from their family. For children in out-of-home care, however, their birth family ties have been damaged and often severed. It's painful to think about



youth who have birthday after birthday in an out-of-home placement without receiving even a card or a call from birth parents, grandparents, or siblings. Ironically, while the youth struggles to get through such holidays without birth family contact, there are very likely birth family members who are thinking of and missing him or her. And while the youth is struggling to form a healthy sense of identity, he or she may end up ultimately identifying with individuals who are a negative influence, as the need to belong to someone – anyone -- is so overpowering at this stage of development.

Establishing lifelong connections with important adults is a major factor in ensuring a youth's success as an adult. For many youth in out-of-home care, their connections to their foster parents and foster siblings are their lifelines. Children who are adopted are able to have a lifelong family to provide needed guidance and support. However, children who have been through the child welfare system - who may have been abused and neglected -- typically need an ongoing support system in addition to their foster and adoptive family to help them succeed. Furthermore, research shows that children – adopted or not – long for connections to their biological family, and they develop a sense of their identity from their biological family.

*In every conceivable manner, the family is  
the link to our past, bridge to our future.*

Alex Haley, author of [Roots: The Saga of an American Family](#)

## How You Can Help

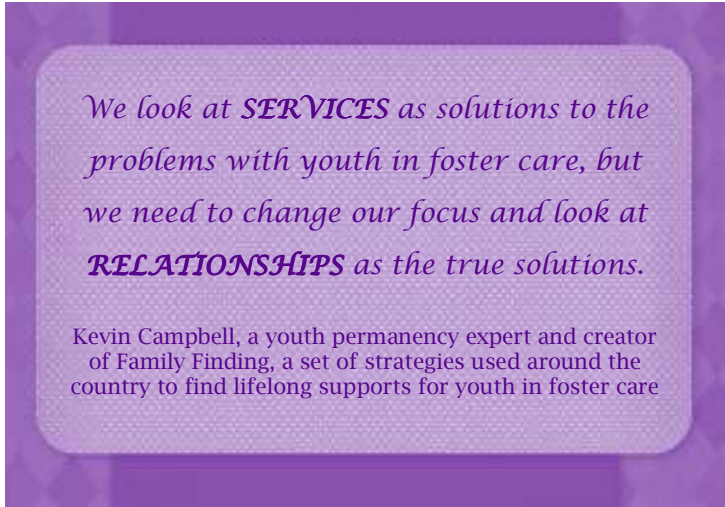
As a foster and/or adoptive parent, one of your top priorities is to help the children in your care have the tools necessary to form healthy connections and supports. The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA) has developed this booklet to help you identify, locate, and engage as many caring individuals as possible – biological and other -- to support the child in your care over his or her lifetime.

## Permanency – What Does It Mean?

While permanency planning was originally intended to limit the time a youth spent in out-of-home care, achieving permanency is not the same as having a permanent place to live. For our purposes, achieving permanency means having lasting relationships that:

- Are safe and secure;
- Provide physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being;
- Assure connections to extended family, siblings, other adults, family history and traditions, racial and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language.

Permanency will look different for every youth.



*We look at **SERVICES** as solutions to the problems with youth in foster care, but we need to change our focus and look at **RELATIONSHIPS** as the true solutions.*

Kevin Campbell, a youth permanency expert and creator of Family Finding, a set of strategies used around the country to find lifelong supports for youth in foster care

## 20 Things a Permanent Connection Means to Me

- 1) A person that you will be able to talk to for the rest of your life.
- 2) Having someone or someplace to go to when I need to, at any time, forever.
- 3) Someone or something that is there for you through *all* the good and *all* the bad.
- 4) Someone who is able and willing to help us learn the things that we should know, at that time in our lives.
- 5) A type of connection that will be with you or have permanently.
- 6) Someone who is there to help with things in my life.
- 7) Someone that you can trust.
- 8) A person you can trust that will help you in a time of need. Someone who is there to help me with the things in my life.
- 9) Someone who helps you reach your full potential.
- 10) Kicking back with someone that is cool.
- 11) Someone that is there when I am sad, angry, or just need something.
- 12) A person that is always there for you.
- 13) A person that can be there for you when you need a shoulder to lean on, support financially, a home and advice.
- 14) Having a lasting bond to another individual.
- 15) Something that is permanent.
- 16) Being close, trusting someone.
- 17) Someone that will stay with you through thick and thin.
- 18) It is a connection that you make with a person, like a soul mate.
- 19) Someone that you spend that rest of your life knowing.
- 20) Someone that you stay in touch with.



*~ As polled by current and former foster and probation youth ~ Fresno County Dept. of Children & Family Services - California Permanency For Youth Project Initiative*



### Start Now

Many people think they will help children connect with birth family and others sometime – when the child is more stable, when the child is older, or after the adoption is final, for example. However, **now** is the right time to start making connections for the child in your home. If you do not start now, you will lose valuable time to connect with others, and you will lose valuable time to teach the child to have positive and appropriate relationships with others.

### Confidentiality in Foster Care and Adoption

If you are the youth's foster parent, **you must get approval from the DHS worker** to contact anyone on behalf of the youth, and you must include the worker in all aspects of this process.

At the same time, it is important for you to understand the youth's need for connections. Because you are the youth's primary caregiver, you will have countless opportunities to hear the youth talk about people who are important to him or her. You may also witness negative behaviors when the youth sees another child in your home receive a call from Grandma, for example. Document everything you hear and observe and share it with the DHS worker. You may help discover a distant cousin or special teacher who can play an important role in this youth's life.

If you are the youth's adoptive parent, you are free to make connections with anyone on behalf of your child. However, be sure to consider **safety first** in all your decisions. If you have a bad feeling about a potential contact, step back and reassess the situation before you proceed.

## Youth Express Their Need for Connections in Many Ways

Youth tell us about their needs and wants in a variety of ways. As foster and/or adoptive parents, we often need to be sensitive to pick up on subtle cues:

- Youth may openly express a desire to have a family. Look for ways the youth expresses a desire to reconnect with his or her birth family or to be able to visit birth family for birthdays, holidays, etc.
- Youth may express a desire to maintain the limited birth family connections they have.
- Youth may want to reestablish birth family connections. Sometimes youth may talk about birth family members that once visited them.
- Youth may talk about others in the home receiving calls or letters from birth family members when they are not. They may also talk about how they feel when they see others going on visits or receiving visits from birth family members.
- The youth sometimes may act out instead of expressing his or her feelings. There are behavioral expressions of feelings directly related to feelings of hopelessness and confusion about birth family connections. Typical behavioral expressions include depression, running away, aggressive outbursts, and suicidal behaviors. Through these nonverbal behavioral expressions the youth may be crying out for help in understanding the birth family relationships and their need for some kind of a connection to their birth families.

*Youth have a right to many lifelong permanent relationships. All connections that serve to anchor the youth are important throughout their lives and need to be strengthened.*

Social worker



### Common Myths, Mindsets, and Barriers

There are a number of common concerns that people have expressed that often cause delays in connecting youth to important people in their lives. The following represent some of the most common concerns, myths and mindsets:

- “We already do this.” Considering that youth typically have 40-100 relatives with which to connect, there is always room to do more.
- “Middle Class Bias.” Sometimes people settle into a “middle class bias” and are more comfortable in facilitating visits with people of the same socioeconomic status, race, etc., as the foster home in which the youth has been residing. Cultural, social, and economic differences need to be acknowledged without inhibiting lifelong relationships.
- “This child has no family.” We often think that a youth does not have birth family because there is no record of any relatives in the file nor can the youth recall any other birth family. Child welfare workers in other states that practice Family Search and Engagement often locate as many as **40 relatives** for a youth!
- “Teenagers don’t want or need family.” It is often assumed that because a youth may be angry at his birth parents or a relative that he or she does not want or need to connect with anyone. We all need connections. Nobody is ever too old to need a committed, supportive and loving relationship with others.
- “Termination should be completed or the child should be stabilized before searching for or involving anyone else in planning or visits.” Research indicates that connections can help stabilize youth.
- “The child’s negative behaviors may intimidate any potential connections.” While it is true that many youth in care have complex needs and challenging behaviors, people who care about the child typically will care about him or her regardless of the challenges the child presents. You are seeking lifelong connections who will stand by the child during good and bad times. Also, it is common for youth to act out because they long for a connection to biological family and because their family is in total disarray. Not making the connection may actually increase the negative behaviors. Frequently, behavior improves as children feel a sense of safety and improved understanding.

### Create a Team of People to Help

The first step in helping the youth identify and develop lifelong connections is to create a team of people who are important to the youth. Remember, if you are a foster parent, you must get the DHS worker's approval before proceeding.

The most important member of the team is the youth. The youth often has information that the professionals do not. Sometimes the youth may also know how to contact or reach people even if he or she doesn't have a phone number or address.

To help the youth define who is important in his or her life, consider having the youth draw a simple family tree. Also, here is a list of questions to start the conversation about lifelong connections with youth:

- Who do you call family?
- Who do you count on?
- Who do you want to spend time with as you grow up?
- Who do you spend holidays with? Who would you like to spend holidays with?
- Who do you spend your free time with?
- Who has made you feel special? Who believes in you? Who says nice things about you?
- Who do you admire?
- Do you have anyone you consider a mentor? A favorite teacher, coach, etc.?
- Do you have fond memories of a daycare provider, coach, teacher, etc.?
- Do you go to a church, synagogue or mosque? Are there people there you look up to?
- Who would you invite to a graduation party? Your wedding?
- Who do you call if you have good news? Bad news?

While talking with the youth, **it is important to gather information while not building up unrealistic expectations.**

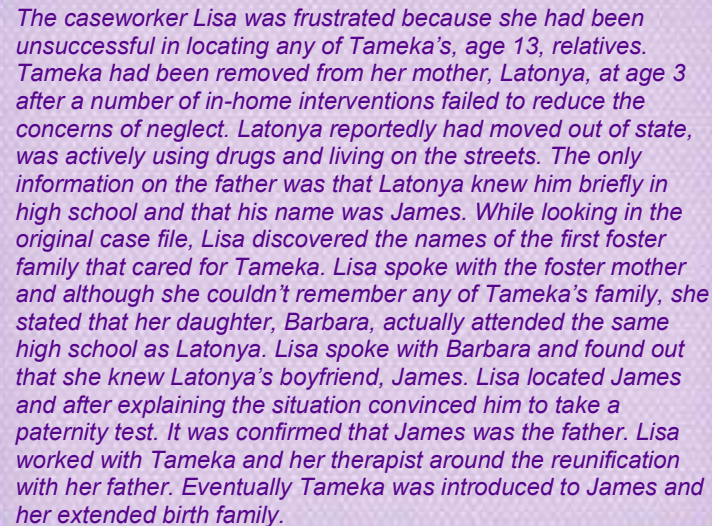
*Dennis was an eight-year-old boy in foster care who was struggling academically and socially. In one IEP meeting the teacher told the team, "The only positive thing going on in his life is his association with his church." The teacher was encouraged to contact the Bishop of the boy's church who in turn referred a retired couple from their church, the Hyltons, who were retired primary school teachers. This energetic couple agreed to form a reading group for Dennis and a few peers. The Hyltons met with the group twice a week at school, and it didn't take long before it became a big hit that the students looked forward to attending. The Hyltons helped these children improve their reading skills and their social skills. They also took a special interest in Dennis, supporting him at school and church. Before the end of the school year, they completed foster care licensing to provide occasional respite. Later when Dennis was united with his Uncle Jake, the Hyltons remained involved, often inviting Dennis to spend a weekend with them, providing a much-needed break for Uncle Jake and a weekend of fun for Dennis and the Hyltons.*

The second most important members of the team are caring adults who know the youth well and care about his or her future.

Once you identify the key team members, ask them to participate in a meeting or phone conference about possible lifelong connections for the youth. This team should include all the professionals that work with the youth and all the people who are important to the youth, including:

- The youth and their birth parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives, godparents
- Foster, respite, adoptive parents and former foster parents
- DHS worker, DHS Transition Planning Specialist & Remedial Services worker, therapists, probation officer
- Current and previous teachers, school counselor
- Guardian ad litem/Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)
- Youth peers, neighbors, youth pastor
- Sports coach, scout leader, YMCA group leader

Include everyone for what they can contribute. Do not exclude someone for what they cannot contribute. For example, even parents who are incarcerated can and do contribute to the process, and they often appreciate the opportunity to help their child. Incarcerated parents have often been extremely helpful in providing information about their family history, family members, and memories or stories of family strengths. If you do not have many people to include, start with the people you have available. The network may help identify others that you do not know about. Starting small is a place to start!



*The caseworker Lisa was frustrated because she had been unsuccessful in locating any of Tameka's, age 13, relatives. Tameka had been removed from her mother, Latonya, at age 3 after a number of in-home interventions failed to reduce the concerns of neglect. Latonya reportedly had moved out of state, was actively using drugs and living on the streets. The only information on the father was that Latonya knew him briefly in high school and that his name was James. While looking in the original case file, Lisa discovered the names of the first foster family that cared for Tameka. Lisa spoke with the foster mother and although she couldn't remember any of Tameka's family, she stated that her daughter, Barbara, actually attended the same high school as Latonya. Lisa spoke with Barbara and found out that she knew Latonya's boyfriend, James. Lisa located James and after explaining the situation convinced him to take a paternity test. It was confirmed that James was the father. Lisa worked with Tameka and her therapist around the reunification with her father. Eventually Tameka was introduced to James and her extended birth family.*

### **Document, Document, Document!**

If you are a foster parent and are not able to develop a team to initiate contact with birth family and other supports, often the most important thing you can do is document the names and information the youth shares with you. Provide this information to the

caseworker so it can become part of the youth's permanent record. This way, it will be available to the youth in his or her records whenever it is needed – even if it is not until he or she ages out of foster care.

Accurately record the youth's contacts and information about people and the quality and strength of relationships. In addition to names, numbers, and addresses, it is also helpful to indicate circumstances or temporary barriers that might be important for others to know for future follow-up. (For example, Aunt Mary is interested in visiting or allowing John to come visit her but she is scheduled for knee replacement surgery and will be more available in the near future.) It is also important to document any known illegal or inappropriate activities of people for safety precautions.

*The Family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.*

**Erma Bombeck, humorist and author**

### Connections Vary

Too often we look at a youth's connections only as possible placements. We need to move away from that mindset and see a youth's connections to biological family, friends, teachers, and others as people who can provide support in a variety of ways — from a permanent parent to a time-limited resource and support.

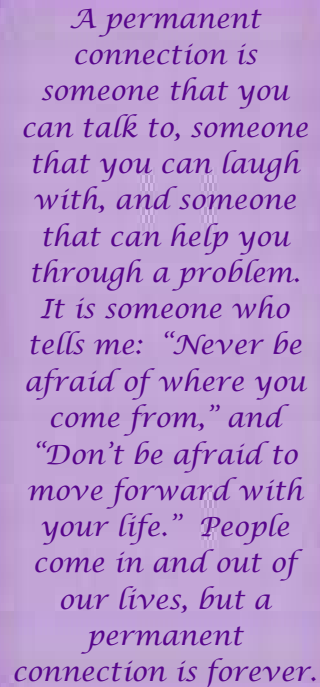
Each identified person can be considered for many possible supportive roles and activities:

- Information only
- Planning
- Phone, e-mail, cards, or letters
- Visiting the youth
- Taking youth on outings
- Allowing youth to visit them
- Respite care
- Placement
- Financial support
- Emotional support
- Family pictures and stories
- Other...

The focus is not solely on placement, but on connection. If this is not done carefully, potential connections may be scared away if they feel there is only an interest in placement. The whole range of possibilities should be explored. Keep all possibilities alive.

As the current state of potential connections (e.g.: adult cousins that are stable in life or grandparents who are near end of life) and the youth's needs (e.g.: placement, visits, or transportation) are reviewed, you need to consider logistics and parameters for initial involvement, legalities, and privacy. Safety planning takes a heightened role in this stage. If the child is in foster care, the DHS worker must be part of this process. If you are an adoptive parent, you are responsible for this process. Do not hesitate to ask others for advice or help.

**LOGISTICS** - Where do the people contacted live? How can they become a part of the youth's life? What contact does the youth need at this point? Where is this person in his or her own life? What is his



*A permanent connection is someone that you can talk to, someone that you can laugh with, and someone that can help you through a problem. It is someone who tells me: "Never be afraid of where you come from," and "Don't be afraid to move forward with your life." People come in and out of our lives, but a permanent connection is forever.*

**Former foster youth**

or her interest level? Missteps here can interfere with reconnections or potential connections.

**LEGALITIES** - Throughout the process, due diligence remains critical. If the youth is in foster care, any contact must be made through the DHS worker, who will make sure that releases of information are obtained; court and other permissions are granted; and HIPPA compliance and confidentiality are upheld.

**SAFETY** - Safety considerations must be discussed and strategies considered and developed. There may be very little information on some of the potential connections. When you are ready to share the information with the youth (if the youth does not know specifics already) and invite these folks to be a part of the youth's life, several safety factors must be reviewed:

- How fragile is the youth? It may be important to have a plan for a reaction from the youth, which could include physically acting out, running away, or withdrawing. Often times the negative behavior is itself due to the need for connection. Are the connections in the youth's best interest in spite of the behaviors exhibited?
- What is known about the person? Is the person reliable and stable? What sort of past guilt may be there? What sort of reactivity or impulsivity is there?
- Past histories and criminal records must be considered carefully.

The end result of this stage can be very rewarding and invigorating. While there are many things to cover and prepare for, the bottom line is that the youth has newly found connections.

*The four basic needs used by the Red Cross to help people in times of emergency are: food, medical care, shelter, and family connections. The foster care system has done well with providing three of these (but not the fourth). Neighbors, friends, family, long-lasting relationships are still a basic need we aren't meeting. -- Kevin Campbell, a youth permanency expert & creator of the Family Finding Strategies*

## Involvement of the Youth in the Ongoing Process

The involvement of the youth at this point in the process will depend on his or her age, developmental stage, emotional stability, preferences, and other variables. While those variables need to be considered, it is important to note that youth in out-of-home care often feel hopeless, lonely, and alone. Behavior is often related to those feelings, and rather than waiting for a youth to “stabilize” before connections are considered, it is essential to keep in mind that connections often are what bring a youth hope, which fosters stability. Some youth will settle down to see what might happen when they learn that people are being contacted and that there may be an opportunity to have some type of relationship. Others will experience anxiety and may have a more difficult time in the short run.

At times, though less frequently, youth will say they do not want to have contact with any members of their birth family. The youth may fear being rejected, particularly if they perceive they are in out-of-home care because of rejections by birth family in the past. Risks, fears, and concerns must be carefully discussed and appropriate strategies developed. There is an art to talking with youth about seeing a long lost parent, uncle, or sibling. With some youth it may help to share information as it is available and verified (with prior permission). With others, it is better to share very little until birth family members have been engaged, background information is complete and favorable, and DHS has approved at least initial contact with the youth.

It is important to remember that youth will have a very difficult time if the process of discovering and engaging others begins and then stalls or comes to a halt. Young people have great difficulty when it seems nothing is moving forward. Youth will also often struggle if they know there have been efforts to engage others and no one has kept them informed. Even if there is little to report, it is essential to check in with the youth to let them know what is or is not happening. Most





importantly, it is critical to work with a sense of urgency so that the process does not lose momentum, resulting in the youth potentially losing hope.

One Iowa adoptive mother has promised her children that if she hears anything from their birth family, she will tell them the same day. This way, she says, the children do not worry that she is hiding something from them, and they are confident they will know the same day their mom does.

If you are unsure about what to do, seek advice from others, such as the child's counselor or therapist.

### **Connections to the Biological Family**

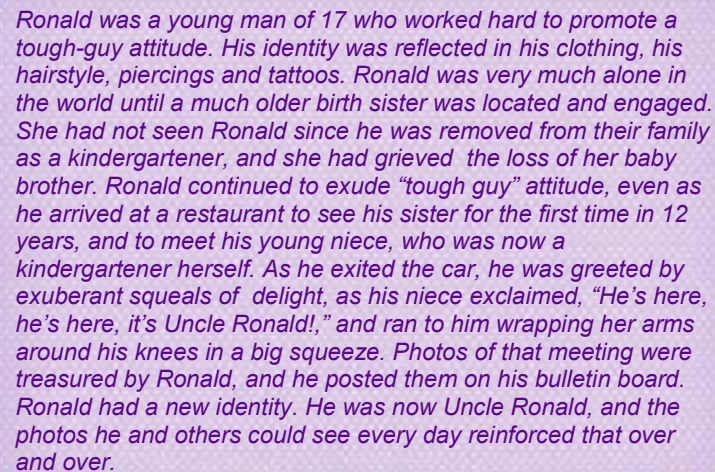
It is normal to feel uncomfortable when connecting with the child's biological family. Remember that maintaining connections to a youth's biological family may help the youth maintain racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and community ties. These connections can help the youth feel better about themselves.

How does connecting with birth family help maintain racial or cultural ties, for example?

Whether of a single race or a mixed race, (biracial), children either feel "a part of" or "separate from." Without connection to their own roots, black children being raised in a white world, for example, will feel "separate from" the family they live with. They will also feel "separate from" the black people they look like who have the same cultural background, but whom they have no connection to. They need connections to those who have shared culture and race. No matter how children are raised, society will assign them to the race and culture of their skin color. Without connections, they will feel lost and isolated, not fitting in with either the white culture they were raised in nor with their own racial culture. By connecting your children to their own race and culture through contacts with birth relatives, they will learn to develop their racial roots while incorporating what they are learning from you about their identity in your transracial home. They will be able to bridge both worlds. (You can learn much more about the topic of Transracial Parenting in the IFAPA booklet "Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family.")

But perhaps it is not safe to connect to biological dad, for example. Experts estimate that children have at least 100 living relatives at one time! You may be able to help to locate long-lost cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings, grandparents, and others who care about the youth; but have either lost contact or were never aware this youth is involved in the child welfare system.

And when you make a connection, it can do wonders for the biological family, as well as the youth. When DHS gets involved with families, the family members often feel embarrassed, unworthy, and hopeless. When we connect children to positive birth family members, we build on the inherent strengths of families, restore the dignity of each family and individual by telling the truth about family circumstances, and give each relative an opportunity to help the child in the most appropriate way possible.



*Ronald was a young man of 17 who worked hard to promote a tough-guy attitude. His identity was reflected in his clothing, his hairstyle, piercings and tattoos. Ronald was very much alone in the world until a much older birth sister was located and engaged. She had not seen Ronald since he was removed from their family as a kindergartener, and she had grieved the loss of her baby brother. Ronald continued to exude "tough guy" attitude, even as he arrived at a restaurant to see his sister for the first time in 12 years, and to meet his young niece, who was now a kindergartener herself. As he exited the car, he was greeted by exuberant squeals of delight, as his niece exclaimed, "He's here, he's here, it's Uncle Ronald!" and ran to him wrapping her arms around his knees in a big squeeze. Photos of that meeting were treasured by Ronald, and he posted them on his bulletin board. Ronald had a new identity. He was now Uncle Ronald, and the photos he and others could see every day reinforced that over and over.*

## Making the First Contact

Remember, if the child is in foster care, the DHS worker must approve all contact you make on behalf of the child. You must also remember to respect the child's and birth parents' confidentiality.

Some attempts to contact birth family members or friends may be met with a less than enthusiastic response. Your letter or call will most likely catch the person off-guard. They may be stunned and act negatively. If you anticipate that a phone call could stun someone, consider initiating contact with a letter first. If you do call and a birth family member hangs up without hearing more than a few sentences, send a thank you note, expressing appreciation for their time and understanding the difficulty and surprise the person must have experienced in being contacted. Include contact information, inviting the family member to call or write back if they might be able to share any information that will help the child. Persist even when progress seems slow or difficult. A child who feels alone deserves as many calls or letters as it takes.

## SAMPLE PHONE CALLS

### **First Telephone Call Scripts with Relatives:**

#### **First "cold call" attempt**

"Hi, my name is Patti, is this Jon Smith?"

#### **[if a female answers]**

"Did I reach the Smith residence?"

#### **[yes]**

"Great, I'm so glad I reached you! I'm \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm working on a family tree project with a relative of yours and I'm having a difficult time figuring out who's who. Can you help me for just a few minutes? (They almost always say yes.) Thank you, I promise not to keep you long."

#### **Leaving a telephone message before you're sure if you have the right number.**

"Hi, I hope I've got the right phone number? I'm looking for a Jon Smith who used to live in Des Moines. If I have reached the right person I have some information about a relative of yours. Would you please call me back and let me know for sure. Thank you so much. Call me at 555-123-1234. I really appreciate your help!"

## **Making the First Contact - SAMPLE PHONE CALLS**

**Calling back a relative that left a message. Sometimes a letter has been sent to the relative and they have called after reading the letter.**

“Thank you so much for leaving me a message (and responding to my letter). Are you in a place where you can talk right now because I am helping Jordan to find out more information about his family? Remember the questions (from the letter) that Jordan had, such as who he looks like, how many cousins he has, family reunions...Your help sharing this information could really make a positive difference for Jordan.”

**If they don't return a call from your letter**

“I am calling to follow up on the letter that I sent you a week ago. I can imagine this might be a difficult phone call to receive. Are you in a place where you can talk right now? Because I am helping Jordan learn more information about his family. Remember the questions from the letter that Jordan had, such as who he looks like, how many cousins he has, family reunions...what would you be willing to tell me? Allow time for the person called to explain their situation, to tell their story about Justin.”

**If the person asks about the youth's situation**

- “I know that you must have questions. I really can't answer them right now due to confidentiality. But his DHS worker might welcome your call. There may be a time in the future where we could talk to you and answer some of your questions. Again I realize that this is difficult but my primary concern right now is to help Jordan get answers to some of his questions. Your help with this information could make such a difference in his life.”

**Or**

- “I really wish I had the ability to talk with you more about Jordan but right now I'm trying to piece his family tree together. All I can tell you is that he's curious about who he looks like, wants to know if anybody else in the family loves to sing, and we would like him to know that he has family out there. One of the things that might really help our conversation today is if you could tell me one of the things you are most proud of about your family. A story or something someone has done in the past that was very special to you. What about family reunions and gatherings? What are your family traditions?”

## Making the First Contact - SAMPLE PHONE CALLS

### **Try to get their name and contact information**

They might want to just tell you their view of things. As they do, whether it's the information you want or not, continue to thank them for their great insights. If people feel you value their opinion, they will warm up more, eventually giving you the information you're looking for. It seems that everyone in a family has a different take on how things got to where they are. Throughout their telling of the story, you will learn names, strengths, and needs.

### **If they ask about how to have contact with the youth**

"I want to assure you that I am going to share your information and how to contact you with the rest of my team. It sounds like you're offering to help Jordan more. Let me write down the things that you are willing to do and I will get back to you."

### **If they cannot have any contact with the child**

"This will be important to Jordan to have your help. The information that you share with me could truly improve this child's life." (Default back to questions about family.)

### **If person sounds upset**

- "I can't imagine what you must be feeling right now. I am so sorry for what your family has been through."

**Or**

- "Is it okay for us to talk just a little bit or should I call back another time (specify)? I really do understand this is difficult, but if it's ok I just want to be able to give Jordan a few answers to questions; sometimes he really feels lost. Can you imagine what it must feel like to not be able to ask a relative "Was my dad a good basketball player too?" Thank you. I really appreciate you giving me a little of your time, and Jordan really appreciates it too."



### **Ending the call**

"You might think of more things that are important for Jordan to know over the next few days, or you might know other family members who would like to share information with Jordan. Please feel free to contact me at \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you so much for sharing this important information. It is really valuable for Jordan."

## Making the First Contact - SAMPLE LETTERS

### **Letters to Relatives**

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Fuego,

I am writing to you about your nephew Brad. I adopted Brad a year ago, and he has asked me to help him locate his extended family. He would like to reconnect with his relatives and is hoping that he could write to you, his aunt and uncle, as well as his cousins. You may not know it, but he is going to graduate in June and he would love to see you at his graduation. I know my letter may come as a surprise to you; for that I apologize. This may be a sensitive topic, but please know we are supporting Brad to regain a connection to his birth family. I will try to reach you next week by phone; hopefully you will have had time to think about reconnecting with Brad.

Sincerely,

Nicole Smith - 555-123-1234 / Email: [nicolesmith@msn.com](mailto:nicolesmith@msn.com)

Dear Ms. Vanhouten,

My name is Ace, and I adopted your son Jim four years ago. Jim talks about his biological family often, and he would appreciate any kind of contact from his birth family. I have enclosed a pre-paid phone card for you to use to reach me. On a personal note, I am very concerned for Jim as he is struggling in school and doesn't seem to have very many friends. I believe that he would do much better if I could connect him with more people that care about him and can support him to be successful. I look forward to talking with you and hope you might give me some information that will assist me in helping Jim.

Sincerely,

Ace Deck (555-354-3544)

Dear Bonnie,

I am writing about Jordan, the biological son of James Woodrow Pierce Jr. (d.o.b. 12/65), who I believe may be a relative of yours. I do not know how much you know about Jordan, and this letter may come as a surprise to you. I apologize for any possible pain this letter may cause. I am writing because Jordan would really appreciate some information about his father's extended birth family; such as who he looks like, how many birth cousins he has, and if there are family reunions. You can imagine the sorts of questions that a boy would have about his birth family and culture.

I will call in a week to make sure you received this letter. In the

## Making the First Contact - SAMPLE LETTERS

*(Continued)*

meantime, if you would like to talk to me sooner, please feel free to write or call me. I am also enclosing a copy of Jordan's family tree and a general family story page so that Jordan can learn about the Pierce Family. Thank you in advance for helping Jordan discover a greater sense of identity.

Sincerely,  
Nicole Smith

Dear Ms. Tran,

I would like to speak with you about your nephew, Phillip. We have lost track of most of Phillip's relatives and would love to share with you how he is growing up. Phillip has pleasant memories from his early childhood of family gatherings and seeing relatives during the holidays. However, he hasn't had any communication with his biological family for quite some time now and would appreciate hearing from them. I want to help Phillip complete a family tree that identifies his relatives on both sides of the family and hope you can help. I have enclosed a pre-paid phone card for you to use to reach me. Please call me at the number below and I will continue to try to reach you.

Iowa adoptive parents Mike & Audra Larimer have successfully used the following letter to connect their children with their birth siblings:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You don't know me and I don't know you, but I believe your daughter's biological brother John is living with us. He is safe and loved in our home. He is now 12 years old and in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We are interested in being able to get the kids together as it has been a long time since they have seen each other. We want to do this in a safe and appropriate way and would like your assistance in determining how that would occur. It is important to us that we be sure we have contacted the right home, whether this is something you would like to pursue at this time or not. Please return the enclosed card or contact us via email indicating whether we have found the right home and whether or not you are interested in some type of contact at this time. If you wish not to be contacted, but we have truly found a sibling, please let us know that as well and I promise you we will honor your wishes.

## Making the First Contact - SAMPLE LETTERS

### **Example letters to former foster parents, professionals and teachers:**

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I am the adoptive parent of James Peach who was a student of yours when he was in first grade at Sherman Elementary School from 2000 to 2001. I am searching for information that would help me identify and locate his birth family and other relatives. James is very interested in learning more about his birth family and we would appreciate any helpful information that you could share. Please contact me at my number below. Thank you in advance for taking a few minutes to share any information that you think may be helpful.

Sincerely,

Tom Jones

555-123-1234

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jones,

I am the adoptive parent of James Peach who I believe you fostered from age three to five. I am writing because James has not had any contact from his biological family (cousins, aunts, uncles, or grandparents) for about ten years. Now that he is 17 he is hoping to reconnect with them. Do you happen to have any pictures of James or special memories of his childhood that you might share? We would also appreciate any information that could help us contact any of his birth family members. I will call in about a week to make sure you received this letter. Until then, please feel free to call me if I can answer any questions. You can reach me at 555-123-1234.

Sincerely,

Tom Jones

*Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.*

**Jane Howard, Families**



### Meeting Birth Family & Others for the First Time

For the first meeting with birth family or other connections, begin by setting up a meeting with only the adults. This way, you can “feel out” the situation before placing the youth in a potentially unsafe or uncomfortable situation. Once you are comfortable with the adults – and this may take more than one meeting – you can proceed to setting up a visit with the adults and child or children.

It is essential to create a welcoming and inviting environment when meeting with newly found family members, particularly those who may be fearful of anyone connected with the child welfare system. Make sure that the meeting time and place are convenient for family members (evening and weekend times may be most appropriate), and that meetings are held in neutral settings, such as a park or restaurant.

Stress the strengths within the family from the very beginning of the conversation. For example, when speaking with a child’s biological uncle, “I’ve heard that you and your brother love to sing. Is the rest of your family musical as well?”

If the person has not had contact with the youth in some time, it’s helpful for him or her to hear about the youth’s strengths, interests, talents, or hobbies. If there are common interests and strengths, mentioning them can help the relative begin to feel a bit connected with the youth (“Did you know that Darien seems to be musical as well? Last month he started singing with the school choir.”) It’s helpful to let the person know that the child has had a rough time, and to explain that often youth who are lonely for family and struggling to develop a sense of identity may be depressed or may have issues with anger.

If and when you are ready to include the youth in visits, plan the first visit at a neutral location where the child or children do not need to focus all their attention on the adults, such as the park or indoor play area. The youth can take breaks and talk when he or she is comfortable.



### Prepare Yourself for the First Meeting

- It is important to understand that it is normal for youth to experience some level of anxiety before visits.
- Your reaction to the youth's expression of feelings after a visit can support the youth to continue visits and connections.
- What if the person does not show up for the visit? Hopefully, a phone call can provide an explanation and you can make alternate plans. Spend the time with the youth -- going out to lunch or taking a walk in the park, for example -- to talk about his or her feelings about what happened.
- What if the youth or birth family member gets angry or aggressive? Sometimes the youth may have some unresolved feelings toward a birth family member (a parent that left her in care or one who is not making progress on his substance abuse treatment plan) and may feel the need to express those feelings towards the family member. If at anytime you feel things are not going well, shorten or end the visit.
- What if the youth does not want to return home with you or runs away? Sometimes with the promise of scheduling additional visits and encouragement from loving family, the youth can be persuaded to return. When a youth actually runs away, follow standard runaway protocol.
- Remember that the connections created are for the purpose of providing additional ongoing support and enhancing the youth's sense of identity.

### Prepare the Youth for the First Meeting

- The youth may be apprehensive about meeting the birth family. Let the youth know that the purpose of initial meetings is to just get to know each other.
- Some youth may have unrealistic expectations about going home with the person. It's best to talk with the youth before the visit to find out what their expectations might be and to prepare the youth and address these concerns appropriately.



### Prepare the Potential Connection for the First Meeting

- Provide a general overview of the youth's strengths and needs.
- Provide a basic description of the youth's developmental and emotional age.
- Help the person to be sensitive to the youth's expectations around this visit. It is important to focus on having a pleasant time and enjoying this visit. Care should be taken so the person does not set up unrealistic expectations that may be upsetting to the youth.
- Before the first meeting, prepare for follow up visits or possible other next steps. For example, in preparing the person for the initial visit, you could discuss how the visit will end with a suggestion to plan a follow up visit. If everyone knows this in advance it will reduce pressure and potential awkwardness at the end of the visit.

### Internet Search Tools and Tips

It may be necessary for you to search the Internet to find lost birth family members. The following section contains guidelines to Internet searches including some of the most commonly used search tools and resources as well as some helpful search tips. It should be noted that this information is accurate as of June 2008. Websites change frequently.

### Free Internet Search Sites

The free search sites you encounter on the internet are those that provide information very similar to what you would obtain by calling "411" directory assistance or looking in the "white pages" directory. Many sites will advertise "free searches" but only give limited information and try to get you to purchase a premium search. The use of these sites is fairly intuitive and prompts you to enter basic information: first and last name and state where the person resides. Some have "advance search options" which are helpful if the name you are searching is common. Advance search options allow you narrow the search results by entering city, zip code, age, birth date, etc. You are asked to enter as much information that you can and the successful search results will provide you with the address, phone number and sometimes offer a map to the house.

The following is a list of a few of the most popular free search sites. All sites will offer other premium searches that charge various rates for additional information (public records, social security or background check searches). These sites do not require you to purchase anything to get the free search results.

[www.zabasearch.com](http://www.zabasearch.com)

Search by name, city, state and birth year. Provides name, address, phone and map to get to address. Also offers reverse search (enter 10 digit phone number to get an address).

[www.anywho.com](http://www.anywho.com)

Search by name, street, city, state and zip. Provides name, address, phone number and map. Offers address and reverse searches.

[www.dogpile.com](http://www.dogpile.com)

Search by name city and state. Provides name, address, phone number and map.

[www.reversephonedirectory.com](http://www.reversephonedirectory.com)

Search by name, city and state. Search by address and it will provide name of resident living at that location. Also reverse search by entering phone number to find address and name of resident. Cell phone number search can be purchased for a premium.

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

May provide information in addition to the address and phone number. It can link you to newspaper articles, interest groups or other publications connected to the person's name.

### Helpful Internet Search Hints

- Use middle initial if available.
- When entering a birth year it can be approximate.
- Sometimes entering two spelling variations can be helpful. Separate them with a comma (Don, Donald Smith).
- Sometimes entering too many key words can restrict the number of results. (If you don't get any information when you enter the city and the state, scale back and enter just the state.)
- Try variations of the spelling of the first or last name. Sometimes the wrong spelling gets entered into a document or account.

- Try using the first four letters of the last name. This will increase the number of hits for that name but it may also include what you are looking for.
- When searching for a more common name, include additional information such as city, state, year of birth, or age.
- If the last name contains a space, try it without a space (Des Moines, desmoines).
- Sometimes entering the first letter of the first name can be helpful.
- When entering an address, try dropping the thoroughfare (Blvd, Street, Ave, etc.) or the direction (instead of West Jackson, enter Jackson).
- If you know the zip code, use it instead of the city name, but still enter the state.

### **Boolean Searching on the Internet**

The Internet's contents must be searched according to the rules of computer database searching, which is based on the principles of Boolean logic. For an Internet tutorial on searching tips please go to [www.internettutorials.net/boolean.html](http://www.internettutorials.net/boolean.html)

- Using “or” will search one term or the other, or both (Juan or John Gonzalez).
- Using “and” will retrieve searches where only both names searched are present. (Mary and Don Smith)
- Using “not” will eliminate some results that are commonly grouped together (Joey not Joseph Smith)
- Using “quotations” will search exactly what you specify within “ ”
- Using plus signs (+) will ensure these words are included in your search.
- Using minus signs (-) will exclude (or separate) words from your search.



### Fee Based or Premium Internet Search Sites

The following are examples of fee-based resources. Fees range from \$2.95 to \$149.95. The majority of the times these searches will provide extensive and more detailed information than one would receive via a free search. Some search engines will not charge you if they do not locate the person. Typically fee searches provide the following information:

- Current address and up to 10-year history with available listed phone numbers
- Relatives, roommates, and neighbors
- Bankruptcies and tax liens
- Small claims and civil judgments
- Home value and property ownership

[www.ussearch.com](http://www.ussearch.com)

[www.intelius.com](http://www.intelius.com)

[www.usatrace.com](http://www.usatrace.com)

[www.people-search.com](http://www.people-search.com)

[www.publicrecordsnow.com](http://www.publicrecordsnow.com)

[www.peoplefinder.com](http://www.peoplefinder.com)

### General Information about Categorical Search Sites

**Google.com** is a favorite search engine and there are numerous others that work similarly. To conduct a categorical search simply type in a topic such as “free people search,” “free white pages,” “inmate locator services,” “obituary search,” or “public records” and you will find a list of these search resources that can be experimented with or explored. Additionally, you can add state or other qualifying information to these categorical search requests to get even more detailed information. For example, “Arizona obituary search” or “inmate locator federal prisons.” This is an easy way to find multiple search resources as well as new resources that have been developed.

#### **Genealogical Sites**

There are multiple genealogical sites that can be helpful. Through these sites you can search records in the following categories: birth, marriage, death, obituary, Social Security Death Index, and census.

The two most commonly used genealogy based websites are listed below. Their services are free.

[www.familysearch.com](http://www.familysearch.com)

Family Search has an automated help site assistant that walks you through locating records of deceased relatives. It is a very intuitive process that provides hints on search strategies and assists you in locating birth, christening-baptism, marriage, death and census records, and obituaries that can provide information that will lead you to living relatives. For example, obituaries often list names of relative survivors.

Sometimes you can find family tree information that families have already posted. They also have Family History Centers located throughout the nation who have experts who can provide assistance. The website provides locations of these centers.

[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

Ancestry provides many of the resources mentioned above. A map tool can be used that allow you to point and click on states that branch out into counties and resources that help expand your search. You can pay for a membership and access premium search services on this site as well.

### Obituary Search Tips and Resources

There are a number of other sites that can be helpful in obituary searches. As indicated previously, many times information about surviving relatives is written in the obituary.

Additional helpful search hints:

- Find out as much information about a family member's death from talking with known family members. It's helpful to know the death date, city, county, state, etc. Google search the newspaper for that city and state. Contact the newspaper, provide them the information you have and ask if they can do an obituary search for you. If they can't, ask them how you can access this archived information.
- Library reference desk workers are valuable resources. Ask them to help you with an obituary search and provide them the information: death date, city, newspaper and name of person. They usually charge a nominal fee and can fax you the results.

## Obituary Search Tips and Resources

*(continued)*

- If you can obtain a death record, sometimes it lists the contact person (who submitted the information) or the funeral home where the services took place. You can search these resources for more information. For example, funeral homes keep records of the services they provide and often will have contact information of survivors, and sometimes copies of obituaries. Simply Google the funeral home to get their phone number and speak with anyone who will help you.

Other Helpful Obituary Search Sites:

[www.obitlinkspage.com](http://www.obitlinkspage.com)

[www.obitcentral.com](http://www.obitcentral.com)

[www.ancestorhunt.com/obituary\\_search\\_engines.htm](http://www.ancestorhunt.com/obituary_search_engines.htm)

## Other Helpful Search Resources

[www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

MySpace is a popular social networking website offering an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos internationally. Youth have been able to locate their cousins or other birth family members via MySpace.

[www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

Facebook is another popular social networking website.

[www.classmates.com](http://www.classmates.com)

Classmates allows people to stay in touch with others that attended the same high school. There are more than 40 million members.



### Prison Locator Services

There are several ways to locate inmates. You can simply Google “Department of Corrections” plus the name of the desired state and it will inform you how to locate prisoners in that state. There are a number of sites that are helpful in locating prisoners or inmates in the various correctional institutions (county jail, state or federal prisons, etc).

#### [www.vinelink.com](http://www.vinelink.com)

The site is the most comprehensive and provides an easy to navigate search by state. By selecting a state you see which data bases are available on line or you see a phone number to contact for more information for that state.

#### [www.bop.gov](http://www.bop.gov)

Federal Bureau of Prisons website: will provide assistance for inmate locator, facility locator as well as an address directory. You can search for inmates or contact the correctional facilities for assistance in locating someone.

### Final Search Tips

Remember the goal of any search is to find someone you can speak with who can give you helpful information. Don’t spend too much time on the Internet searching. Pick up the phone and call someone! Don’t forget to talk with the people you already know such as the youth, former foster parents, and caseworkers or other professionals because they may know how to contact the person you seek.

### Permanency Pact Toolkit

#### **A free tool to support permanency for youth in foster care**

What's a Permanency Pact? A pledge by a supportive adult to provide specific supports to a young person in foster care with a goal of establishing a lifelong, kin-like relationship.

Youth transitioning from foster care are often unsure about who they can count on for ongoing support. Many of their significant relationships with adults have been based on professional connections that will terminate once the transition from care is complete. It is critical to the youth's success to identify those adults who will continue to provide various supports through and beyond the transition from foster care. Clarifying exactly what the various supports will include can help to avoid gaps in the youth's safety net and misunderstandings between the youth and the supportive adult.

FosterClub, the national network for young people in foster care, has created a list of 45 ways that a supportive adult might offer to a youth transitioning from care. A supportive adult can help by offering any of the following to youth:

- A home for the Holidays
- A place to do laundry
- Emergency place to stay
- Food / occasional meals
- Care packages at college
- Employment opportunity
- Job search assistance
- Career counseling
- House hunting
- Recreational activities
- Mentor
- Transportation
- Educational assistance
- Relationship/marriage/parenting counseling
- Assistance with medical appointments
- Storage
- Motivation
- Someone to talk to/discuss problems



- A phone to use
- A computer to use
- Clothing
- Spiritual support
- Legal Troubles
- Cultural experience
- Apartment move-in
- Cooking lessons/assistance
- Regular check-in (daily, weekly or monthly)
- Bills and money management
- Drug and alcohol addiction help
- Mental health support
- Co-signer
- Help with explaining forms, documents, and complex mail
- Mechanical and/or building projects
- Housekeeping



- Home decorating
- Voting
- Volunteerism
- Finding community resources
- Safety and personal security
- Babysitting
- Emergency cash
- References
- Advocacy
- Inclusion in social circle/ community activities
- Adoption

**FosterClub has posted the entire Permanency Pact on their website. Find it at: [www.fosterclub.com/pdfs/PermPact.pdf](http://www.fosterclub.com/pdfs/PermPact.pdf)**

*Much of the narrative in this booklet was taken with permission from Family Search & Engagement: A Comprehensive Practice Guide, published in 2008 by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services. You can read the Guide here: [http://www.emq.org/press/docs/FSE\\_guide.pdf](http://www.emq.org/press/docs/FSE_guide.pdf)*

*Other information was also taken with permission from the Finding Permanency for Youth Resource Handbook, published by the Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services California Permanency For Youth Project (CPYP) Initiative.*

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