

# Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services Practice Guide Series: How We Do the Work is As Important as the Work We Do

## **How We Do the Work of Engaging and Supporting Birth Families or "Bridging the Gap"**

**Purpose:** To provide guidance on coordinating contact between resource and birth families. The team would consider the type of contact that is in the best interest of the child, as well as ensuring safety for all members.

**Related Policy:** VI-C

### **Related Practice Model Principles:**

- Behavior change and the work of change is part of our daily challenge
- Meaningful decisions require close family participation in decision making
- Sustainable success with families is the work of the team
- Strengths of families and supporting these strengths contribute to life-long permanent relationships for children

### **How We Do the Work of "Bridging the Gap"**

#### Practice Considerations for Caseworkers:

- Encourage information exchange between birth families and resource families, including but not limited to, pictures, school work, progress notes, etc.
- Exchange monthly progress reports with both sets of parents
- Talk positively about each set of parents to the other set
- Schedule regular and frequent visitations as allowed by the court
- Arrange phone contact between the two sets of parents
- Share all information with ALL parents as appropriate
- Encourage resource parents to host sibling visits
- Serve as a liaison between the sets of parents
- Describe resource parents in non-identifying terms at placement
- Assist everyone in understanding cultural differences
- Serve as a positive role model to all the adults

#### Practice Considerations for Resource Families:

- Exchange letters and pictures with the child's family via the caseworker or request a meeting with the biological family to share information
- Call the child's parents on the phone and talk openly with the child about his or her family
- Request pictures of the child's family to display in the child's room
- Send the parents current pictures of the child
- Share copies of homework and report cards with the birth family
- Send a snack or activity for the child's visit
- Encourage the parents' progress and brag to the parent about the child
- Dress the child up for visits
- Share monthly progress reports
- Host or arrange sibling visits
- Request cultural information
- Share the Lifebook with the birth family

### Practice Considerations for Birth Parents:

- Attend and participate in all visits about your child
- Make regular contact with the caseworker and request updates on your child's activities and events
- Write down important information about the child such as diet, routine, habits, etc. and share with the resource family
- Send medical/school/etc. records to the resource family via the caseworker or request a meeting with the resource parent to share information that you know about your child and is important in caring for your child
- Share critical cultural information with the foster parent
- Encourage the child to cooperate with placement, be polite, obey the resource parents, etc.
- Talk with the child about the separation, expressing your own feelings and encouraging expression by the child
- Plan special activities for visits with the child
- Remember the child's birthday and holidays with special gifts or events
- Send cards, letters, and family pictures to the child via the caseworker

**Time Frames:** Continuously

### **Documenting:**

Visitation Screen  
Contacts Screen  
Court Report

During each contact made with the families, with documentation in CHRIS, with each report submitted, and with each court testimony, the caseworker should note the attempts made to bridge the gap between the birth and resource families and whether it was successful or not.

### **Reflection of "Bridging the Gap":**

To assess how effective the practices of "Bridging the Gap" are, supervisors and caseworkers can ask the following general questions:

- Does each set of parents speak from a strength-based stand point about the other set?
- Does the child feel like he or she has to choose between each set of parents?
- Are family visitations positive and non-threatening?
- Do the birth parents bring activities for the child during visitation?
- Does each set of parents exchange information about the child?
- Does each set of parents feel comfortable around the other?
- Does the child seem comfortable with each set of parents in the same room?
- Does the child shy away from either set of parents while both sets are together in a setting?

### **Outcomes of Quality:**

- Recognition and respect toward the birth family as experts on their own children
- The goal of reunification remains real and promotes achievement of reunification or another permanency goal more quickly
- The birth family feels less defensive and more appreciated and capable
- The child sees positive interactions between the birth and foster parents, which can help the child's mental and social health
- By remaining involved with the birth family after reunification as a support during this transition, resource families help assure success for the newly reunified family, and the child is less likely to return to foster care
- Resource families' are able to feel they are really making a difference

- There are reduced feelings of divided loyalties between families

“Bridging the Gap” practices will allow resource and birth families to work together as reunification partners in a less threatening manner that is encouraged by the caseworker. Placement stability will be increased because the child will be less likely to disrupt knowing all of the parents are working together.

*As always, how we do the work is as important as the work we do. If you have other best practices suggestions or examples to share related to engaging birth families, please call 501-682-8759.*

Resources:

[www.nrcpf.org/fewpt/partnerships.htm](http://www.nrcpf.org/fewpt/partnerships.htm)

<http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-F2FRecruitmentTrainingSupport-2001.pdf>