

Coordinating Culture & Care

When a child enters out-of-home care, there are so many questions and so many things on the to-do list. Ensuring that the child is safe, that he or she has the clothing and hygiene products that are needed, and adjusting to a routine take precedence for all involved. However, understanding the culture a child in foster care is coming from when he or she is placed with a foster parent, is an integral part of welcoming that child into your care, making him or her feel safe, and helping lay the foundation of a successful transition.

In each of our family lives, there are likely hundreds of little habits or rituals that occur every day without us even thinking about it; they are what make up our family's "cultural norm."

Children who come into foster care have these same kind of customs, routines, and traditions that were part of the cultural norm in their family of origin. Now, having arrived in your home and with your family, they are faced with having to learn a whole new family culture and figuring out how they fit into it.

Getting to know more about a new child's culture

can help you, as a foster parent, understand the child much better. While you learn about and work in ways to honor the child's experiences, preferences, and routines, you can also teach him or her about your home, your own family's culture, the values that are important to you, and the customs you honor. You might ask questions such as:

- "How does your family celebrate holidays/birthdays?"
- "How are household chores done at your home?"
- "What is your favorite dinner?"
- "What is your bedtime routine like?"

Like in all things that are new or unfamiliar, a new living situation takes time for all to adjust. As foster

parents, we know you try very hard to be welcoming and comforting, with a goal of helping children and youth new to your homes make successful transitions. By being flexible and adjusting the culture of your home to accommodate some aspects of the child's culture, you can give the children or youth in your care time to figure out his or her new surroundings, as well as reduce any possible cultural conflicts.



Co-parenting Across Cultures

In essence, all child placements can be considered “cross cultural.” Sometimes our thinking about culture revolves around race, ethnicity, and nationality. While these are all significant components of culture, there are many other cultures that we all belong to. Each neighborhood, each school, and especially each family has a unique culture of its own. When children enter foster care, they experience a profound loss of connections to the cultures that they have grown accustomed to. In addition, they face adapting to a new family’s culture, a new neighborhood, and maybe even a new school. These challenges can lead to a lot of confusion and anxiety.

One way to minimize these challenges is through a shared parenting approach, in which foster parents work together with birth parents and other birth family members. Shared parenting can sometimes be challenging for all involved. However, for the children, the experience of having the adults and caregivers in their lives work together harmoniously can greatly increase their sense of wellbeing and safety. Birth parents can help you understand the culture the child has known until now. They can explain the routines, values, customs, rituals, and dynamics that the child grew up with before coming to your home. They might also help you understand the child’s behaviors, moods, and how to comfort or soothe him or her. If you are open about your own family’s routines, values, customs, rituals, and dynamics, the birth parents might be able to help you identify potential trouble spots that you may not have considered.

Following are some examples that may be helpful as you seek to find a common ground.

- **Food:** Food is one of the most distinct and treasured parts of any culture. This is especially true in individual family cultures. You might ask birth parents or family members if they can share a recipe for the child’s favorite meal. You could also explore how your family’s diet is different and strategize ways to incorporate the child’s favorite foods into your diet. There may also be customs surrounding eating that need to be considered, like meal times, table manners, or rituals, such as praying. As the co-parenting relationship progresses, you may even have birth parents over for meals on a regular basis.
- **Daily Routines:** Your family routines may be very different than the routines the child in your care has grown up with. Things like getting ready in the morning, coming home from school, play time, homework time, and getting ready for bed may simply work differently in your home than they did in the child’s birth home. While it’s probably not feasible to radically change your established family routines, there may be ways to incorporate some familiar routines for the child in foster care. It could be as simple as letting him watch his favorite TV show before bed or calling Grandma once a week.
- **Roles and Expectations:** Roles and expectations for both children and adults vary greatly from culture to culture, and from family to family. Therefore, you may want to explore this topic with birth parents. What role did the child play in his birth family? Was he the oldest, youngest, or only child? What were his chores and responsibilities? Who are the important friends and people in his life who he needs to stay connected to?
- **Communication:** Have you ever gone to another family’s home and felt as if they were speaking a secret language known only to each other, even though they lived just down the street? That’s because families employ different communication

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strategies to express their needs, emotions, and desires. You might want to explore this topic with birth parents, perhaps by asking how their child expresses his needs, as well as strategies to reach the child. Sometimes communication styles aren't always healthy or appropriate, but there are likely some strategies that you can incorporate that will make it easier for the child in care to communicate in his new environment.

There are many other topics you may want to explore with birth parents and family members, such as values, customs, and beliefs. As your relationship and working partnership develops with the child's birth family members, you will likely discover many things that all parties can use to make the child feel more comfortable and secure during his stay in foster care.

When children see their foster and birth parents working together to nurture and support them, they will feel more at ease, will hopefully be able to more easily resolve feelings of mixed loyalty, and, most importantly, feel more free to be a kid. Moreover, being able to hold on to some of the pieces of and connections to their culture will help them to feel a sense of safety and comfort.

Resources

Tip Sheets

wiadopt.org/resources/tipsheets

- Fostering a Child Whose Sibling(s) Live Elsewhere
- Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First
- Planning Ahead: Working Together for Successful Interactions
- Honoring Your Child's Racial and Cultural Identity
- Twenty Ideas for Keeping Connections to Racial and Cultural Identity

Books

- *Another Mother: Co-Parenting with the Foster Care System*, by Sarah Gerstenzang

- *Working with Birth Parents I: Visitation*, by Foster Parent College
- *Families: A Celebration of Diversity, Commitment, and Love*, by Aylette James

Additional Information

- Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook – Chapter 3: Caring for Children in Foster Care
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/fostercare/handbook>
- Transracial Parenting in Foster Care: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family
ifapa.org/pdf_docs/transracialparenting.pdf

- In the Rainbow: Cultural Best Practices in Foster Care
ittakesanohana.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/In-the-Rainbow-Cultural-Best-Practices-in-Foster-Care-Booklet.pdf
- Cultural Diversity in Foster Care: What it Means to Families
foster-care-newsletter.com/cultural-diversity-in-foster-care/#.Vp5YKvkrLIU
- Camp To Belong Wisconsin
ctb-wi.org/



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Maintain a Child's Culture by Supporting the Sibling Connection

For this issue of Fostering Across Wisconsin, we asked Kate and Rob Bauer, Co-Directors of Camp To Belong Wisconsin, Inc., to share an article with us about the importance of the sibling relationship in a child's culture. Our thanks for their help.

Because each family has a culture all its own, the job of a foster parent (or other caregiver) can be even more complicated: how to go about maintaining cultural connections, especially when siblings are separated, which exacerbates the cultural divide even further? Keeping siblings together in placements allows them to maintain some of their family culture. When siblings can't stay together, helping to maintain those bonds and relationships is critical.

Elizabeth Stoffel, a former youth in care and current volunteer for Camp To Belong Wisconsin, Inc. (CTBWI), expresses her personal loss from being separated from her siblings in the following way:

"Losing a sibling to life circumstances beyond your control is something that you never forget and always remember. It is a loss you feel deep in your chest. It is a loss that you spend your waking moments actively ignoring in hopes that you can forget feeling as if an integral part of you has been removed leaving you feeling as if you are no longer a whole person."

Supporting the sibling connection is one way that foster families can help children maintain their familial culture. The Coalition for Children, Youth and Families has an excellent tip sheet to assist families in maintaining the sibling

connections for those children separated within foster care: *Fostering a Child Whose Sibling(s) Live Elsewhere*. Another valuable resource for separated siblings and foster families is Camp To Belong Wisconsin.

CTBWI's mission is for separated siblings to build and maintain connections through a variety of programs. The main program is a summer camp at which children placed in out-of-home care can be with their biological siblings to build memories. CTBWI had its inaugural camp in August of 2015, which is summed up as follows on our August 24th Facebook post:

"Camp To Belong Wisconsin was the catalyst for 30 children creating lasting positive memories with their siblings. During the last six days and give nights, they got to swim, ride horses, sing silly songs, ride in a 21 passenger canoe, frolic at a carnival, celebrate their birthdays, laugh, cry, give goodnight hugs, argue, and have fun together. CTB is a life changing experience that just cannot be put into words. It is captured within our memories and felt deeply in our hearts."

CTBWI will be having periodic sibling connection events throughout the year. We held our first connection event on December 27th at the Riverside Theatre in Milwaukee by attending a holiday show together called "Cirque Holidaze." Watch for upcoming events on [their Facebook page](#).

The 2016 camp session will be August 14-19, 2016. For more information, visit the Camp To Belong website: www.ctb-wi.org.



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our wish:
a family to keep us **together.**

FosterParentsRock.org



our wish:
a family to keep us **safe.**

FosterParentsRock.org



**Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive
Parent Association (WFAPA)**

WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. They also have an extensive website, wfapa.org, a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.

Contact Us!

Please know that we are always here for additional information, resources, and support.

You can contact us toll-free at

800-947-8074

or via email at

info@wifostercareandadoption.org

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