

8 Skills for Building Family Connections

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Derek Peake with his five children, all once in foster care

Should all children have a permanent parent who can take care of them? Yes. Should we work as hard as we can to find such a parent for every child? Yes. In the end, will every youth have such a parent? No. However, every child *can* have family.

We define our families and are defined by them. Families both challenge and nourish their members. Although families are often structured around succeeding generations of parents, they do not have to be. They can be cultivated. Family *structures* are not as important as their *attributes*: offering love and lifelong

commitments; sharing memories and experiences; being welcomed and celebrated; and receiving active support in becoming the best person possible.

The current and former foster youth I have spoken with express both a strong desire to have family and frustration with the system's attitude toward helping them to establish one. They are frustrated by the widely held myths that it is "too late" to help them build family and that family and permanence are always synonymous with adoption.

As CASA and GAL volunteers, we understand how important it is to

establish strong relationships with the children for whom we advocate. I believe it is even more important to help children to build family connections. These connections can be to birth relatives, siblings, friends, foster parents or other caring adults. We can play a critical role in helping build connections for foster children and youth through the following practices.

1. Inquire with Urgency

You will often uncover only traces and clues—and then have to track them down. You will call numbers that are no longer in service, reach houses where everyone has moved on

and talk with people who are angry, indifferent or scared. If the person you are talking to begins to get defensive and starts to shut down, remember that they may hold the key to finding a lifelong connection for the child. Do not be deterred: knock on the door; ask the question. You may be uncomfortable. The people you are talking to may be uncomfortable. But at all times share what is at stake—the best interests of the child.

2. Plan and Assess

As you begin to find potential connections, you will need to assess them—ideally with the rest of the child’s support team. Are they ready for and committed to building a connection? Do the potential benefits of this contact outweigh the potential risks? What is the best form of initial contact? Even in the absence of a team-based decision-making process, it will likely take the efforts of several people to initiate and build the connection. Caregivers may need to drive the child to a visiting location. The social worker may need to supervise the visits. A therapist may need to help the young person prepare for the connection and may even work with the child and the connection together on building their relationship.

3. Prepare for Change

Both the child and the potential connection are likely to have a mix of feelings. They may feel fear, anger, guilt, hope and a sense of hopelessness—all at the same time. They will likely have to know more about each other before they are willing to talk or meet. They may not trust that their histories and choices will be understood. To proceed, it is necessary to shape realistic expectations and recognize that it may take a fair amount of time for either to be willing to take the next step.

4. Initiate Contact

There is no “best” way to initiate contact. It is almost always somewhat tense and awkward. Having a process in place helps.

What will be the best introduction? Should they exchange photos, emails or letters first? Where should they first meet? Who else should be there? What are the activities going to be? How long should it last? Thinking through these questions will help facilitate the introduction, which can be a critical factor in the health of the relationship.

5. Increase Communication and Collaboration

Building connections is more than simply developing relationships. It also means developing the strength of the child’s support network as a whole. The personal and professional connections should be working together to achieve the goals in a child’s case plan. What will happen when the youth leaves the system? Will her support network have the capacity to provide what is needed? Helping to develop lines of communication will greatly increase that likelihood.

6. Deepen Engagement

After the initial contact, a plan will have to be put in place to support the relationship. The child and the team should assess whether it seems promising or whether new concerns have surfaced. The goal is to have the connection make a lifelong commitment to the young person. Again, this does not have to be in the role of a parent. Just having someone who is dependable and consistent, someone to talk with and to hold their memories can be an important asset.


7. Recruit Resources

As the connection develops, you and the child’s support team will be able to assess what potential role the person might play. Can this person potentially adopt or become the child’s legal guardian? Provide a regular place for celebrations and holidays? Tutor or teach a life skill? Does she hold a piece to better understanding the youth’s cultural history or insight into what makes him special? Using a strengths-based

approach, you can be creative about the possibilities without accepting fear-based limits.

8. Anticipate Transitions

The looming transition for too many foster youth is aging out without a permanent family. The child’s professional and personal support system must be examined to see what will remain in place after emancipation. Start by looking at the resources tied to each person, and build on them. Do not discount the value of having even the little things secured, such as a regular phone call to check in. But also think big: finding someone to visit regularly, to help organize information, to discuss future goals and to prioritize next steps. While we cannot assume that future support will be easily accessed, we can ensure that coping strategies are in place to alleviate stress and isolation.

The dangers of leaving the child welfare system without family can be dire. As CASA volunteers, we can speak from experience and from the heart about the impact that feeling connected and having family can have on the life of the foster child we work with and love. To witness anger and depression being replaced by belonging and acceptance is beyond rewarding. Young people need us to prioritize their having family connections as urgent. Our efforts to meet this critical need will result in permanence beyond just placement stability—and will support children in becoming who they are meant to be. 

Derek Peake serves on California’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care and is the former program director for the California CASA Association. He is a founding partner in Costly Grace, a consulting partnership that supports nonprofit organizations, particularly CASA programs, by building capacity and improving program impact. For more information, contact derek@costlygrace.com.