



## Parents' Recommendations for Family Court

Parents come into court feeling powerless. Our life experiences have often made us feel powerless. Our experiences with courts and other authorities – schools, police – have also made us feel powerless. Just being people of color in this society makes us feel powerless. When our children are removed, we feel the ultimate in powerlessness.

To regain our children, we need to find the power inside of us. We need to have the feeling that we are powerful enough to fight these charges, or change our lives.

Court can be part of supporting us in feeling and becoming powerful enough to overcome our obstacles. Or it can be part of making us feel more powerless— and at the mercy of more powerful people.

No one does well in their job or their life if they feel powerless. Too often, courts are places where parents feel small and unheard. Here are our recommendations for improving the court so that parents are more likely to succeed in reunifying with their children.

### **People, Not Cases**

- Please don't call us "Mom" or "Dad," or especially not "Birth Mom." Addressing a parent by her name shows that the judge is seeing you as an individual person and not just as a case number.
- If reunification is the goal, tell us at the beginning that you want us to succeed in reuniting with our children.
- Celebrate our accomplishments.

### **Trauma**

- Be more skeptical of mental health evaluations if clinicians spend very little time with parents, and never or rarely see parents with their children.
- Ensure that parents get a trauma screening.
- Ensure that trauma-affected parents are referred to trauma-focused treatment programs—for the parent alone and for the parent and child.
- Invest in learning about best practices from trauma-informed courts, which focus on safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment.

### **Justice**

- Ensure that families begin with as many visits as possible. Ask yourself, "If this was my child, would I feel comfortable with this visiting plan?"
- Question the agency when the agency or foster parent cancels visits.
- Take it seriously if parents have a concern about their child's safety in foster care.

- Be vigilant about the quality of parents' attorneys. If lawyers don't seem to know their clients or are unprepared, call them out or help us get a better attorney.
- Don't encourage parents – or allow attorneys to encourage us – to plead guilty just to expedite a case.

To show parents you care that they're informed and have a voice, ask parents:

- “Have you gotten the ACS handbook about having a child in foster care?”
- “Have you been introduced to the parent advocate at your foster care or legal agency?”
- “Have you been given a copy of Rise magazine?”
- “Do you feel comfortable with where your children have been placed?”
- “Were you given information about how to make the best of visits?”
- “Did you have a chance to meet with your lawyer before today to plan for this court appearance?”
- “Did you attend the FTC?” If not, “Why not?” If you did, “Did you feel that you were heard in the planning?”
- When the agency asks for a setback in the case, such as reduced visiting, ask, “Did you know before today that the agency was going to recommend this?”

### **Quality Services**

- Be vigilant about parents getting referred to high quality services.
- Ensure that parents are offered information about services so they can make choices about the services that seem right to them.
- Give parents opportunities to hear from other parents about what services have helped them and what those services are like so we know what we're getting into.
- Don't just refer angry parents to anger management. Ask, “Have you been introduced to the parent advocate at your foster care or legal agency? Is there a peer support group that you can join?”

Some of the **services that parents speak highly of** over and over are:

- Parenting Journey
- Video parenting or parent-child therapy
- Family therapy with older children while they're in foster care
- Visit coaching
- Visit hosting or supervised visits outside the agency at parks, libraries, etc.
- Baby & Me (as long as it's voluntary)
- Support groups at their legal agencies (such as at Bronx Defenders and Lawyers for Children)

### **Voice**

- Attorneys and judges, work with parents on how to safely include more of our life stories in court so we feel seen and heard as individuals.
- Develop more opportunities for court professionals to hear from and learn about parents outside of court.