

FAMILY-BASED ALTERNATIVES

Circumstances beyond a family's control sometimes require the out-of-home placement of children with disabilities. Family-based alternatives offer families choice. Research has shown that children have a better chance of thriving and meeting their potential when they grow up in families. We know that children's need for attachment and security can best be met in a family.

Family-based alternative options can meet a variety of family support needs. Children can be placed in an alternate family and yet remain an integral part of the birth family's life, thereby enriching the lives of the entire family.

If desired, birth families participate in all the planning and decision-making involved in the alternative family option. In addition, families can remain a central part of the child's life even while the child live with another family. Birth families even participate in the selection of the alternate family and are encouraged to maintain regular contact with their child.

Family-based options come in many "sizes." Because families and children are all different, no "one size fits all" program will work. Under a shared-parenting relationship, children may spend equal time with the alternative family and the birth family. This arrangement allows for extended periods of respite enabling the birth family time to rest and re-group. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a child may live with an alternative family in a long-term relationship yet continue to see his or her birth family for visits, outings, holidays, etc.

There is no right or wrong combination. Whatever works best for the child, the birth family and the alternative family is the ultimate goal.

In 2001, legislation was passed in Texas that requires the state to begin to develop and implement a system of family-based alternatives for children residing in Texas institutions. It is hoped that by creating this system, families will have real options when faced with the possibility of out-of-home placement for their child. Family-based alternatives have been used successfully for years in other states to support families caring for children with disabilities.

What are family-base alternatives?

- **Support to return home**
- **Another family to share in a child's care – called Shared Parenting**

- **An alternate family to provide full time care – called a Support Family**

Creating family-based alternatives requires simultaneous activity in three areas:

1. Collaborating with **birth families** to explore possible alternatives to residential care for a child with a disability.
2. Recruiting and preparing **Support Families** or **Shared Parenting** arrangements to provide a home for children who can't live with their birth families or who can't live with their birth families full time.
3. Linking together people, supports, and activities of **community agencies as partners** in helping families and children to thrive.

The first goal to be considered is exploring the possibility of finding adequate supports to enable a child to return home. If that is not possible, then the second goal to be considered is the possibility of finding a Shared Parenting arrangement or a Support Family who is chosen by the birth family to care for their child.

What is Shared Parenting?

Shared Parenting is an arrangement in which a family is recruited and trained to help a birth family in caring for their child with disabilities as a means of preventing conditions that lead to residential placement. Shared Parenting is similar to arrangements that occur naturally, for example, when families use their extended kin to care for a child part time or when parents divorce and care is shared between two households. When families with children with disabilities find that their own network of family is unable to help, sometimes a Shared Parenting arrangement can fill a similar role. Shared Parenting arrangements are distinguished by the following features:

- Shared Parenting families are specifically recruited for children with disabilities.
- A Shared Parenting family is paid as a caregiver but care is provided in a family home.
- A recruited family is chosen by the birth family to provide a part-time home for a child on a regular basis scheduled when the birth family needs and wants that kind of help.
- The amount of time shared and the conditions under which care is shared between two families can vary with family's circumstances and preferences.
- Families who provide Shared Parenting are carefully screened, certified, and monitored by a community agency who is responsible for assuring the child's well-being through supervision and support.

- Shared Parenting arrangements include a negotiated agreement between birth parents and shared parents outlining the schedule of care and describing mutual decisions about how to share care. Shared Parenting can be an innovative way to provide practical assistance to a birth family while enabling a child to continue to enjoy the benefits of family life

What is a Support Family?

A Support Family is a family who has been recruited, carefully selected, fully prepared, and paid to provide care for a child with a disability. Support Families are distinguished from traditional foster care by several unique features:

- Support Families are recruited specifically for children with disabilities.
- Support Families are asked to make long-term commitments rather than provide short-term care.
- Birth families can voluntarily choose to use a Support Family without giving up their rights.
- Support Families receive training and preparation specifically for the child who will be placed with them prior to the placement.
- Support Families are carefully matched with children and with their birth families so that the families can work collaboratively for the child.
- Adequate time is taken to prepare the Support Family in order to assure the child's well-being and to ensure the possibility of a long-term arrangement.

A Support Family is different way to arrange caregiving that offers the reliability of a paid caregiver and the lifestyle of a family when birth parents are unable to care for a child.