



## **Technical Assistance Tools Permanency Planning Instrument Section 2. Part 1. Providing Information on Options**

### **Talking about support families**

The idea of a support family caring for a child is greeted with a range of responses by families. Some families whose circumstances prevent them from resuming care of their child will prefer an alternate family living arrangement *if*

- (1) they can be assured of the careful selection and preparation of alternate families,
- (2) they can choose the family who will care for their child,
- (3) they do not lose parental rights to decision-making by placing their child.

An alternate family living arrangement that fits those three conditions is called a “Support Family” (as contrasted with traditional “foster care”). A tool that can help a family who is interested in considering the possibility of a Support Family caring their child is a booklet called “A guide to Choosing a Support Family”. Providing the family with the booklet and walking through it with them can help them to think through the process of exploring an alternate family.

For some families the idea of an alternate family will be greeted with skepticism or outright rejection. A typical source of wariness about the suggestion of a Support Family is some variation of the question:

*“What makes you think that another family can do what we, who love this child, were unable to do?”*

Whether asked outright or left unspoken with the rejection of the idea, part of the process of considering a Support Family will be helping the family to find a satisfactory answer to this question.

The answer can sometimes be found by working through a comparison between the birth family’s experience and the circumstances of Support Families. There are, in fact, a number of ways in which differences between the two families’ can help explain why circumstances might position one more favorably to be able to raise a child with significant disabilities.

These differences need to be presented carefully and respectfully, but they can be a way for a family to come to understand another family's ability or willingness to what they were unable to do.

The differences between the two families lie in the choices that a Support Family has had that were not available to a birth family. **Support families choose whether, how, when, and under what circumstances to be a parent to a child with a disability. By contrast, birth parents usually became the parents of a child with a disability by chance.**

## SUPPORT FAMILY CHOICES CONTRASTS WITH BIRTH FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

- choice to become a parent of a child with a disability
- choice of type of disability
- choice to adapt lifestyle
- choice to parent a child with a disability when fully prepared and ready
- choice to accept public perceptions of disabilities
- opportunity to begin when emotionally prepared
- opportunity to be prepared for the child's needs gradually and in advance
- opportunity to demand and get the support needed
- opportunity to have financial support to assist with family needs

By working through these comparisons, the birth family may begin to see how another family could do what their own circumstances prevented. It can be enlightening for a birth family to think about it this way. Sometimes this kind of discussion can result in a comment like, *"I never thought of it like that before."*

The same comparison should occur with the Support Family as part of their preparation to work with the birth family to help them understand and appreciate the birth family's experience. As these differences are pointed out and digested by the both families, it not only helps them to see how a Support Family might be better positioned, but it also helps the birth family to know that their experience has been recognized.

It can be helpful to both families to develop a Shared Parenting Agreement. This tool may be helpful to a birth family in assuring them that their rights are intact and to think through their relationship with a Support Family. The agreement can be used to help the two families identify and work through the details of their interactions around all aspects of a child's life. The signature of a service system representative on the agreement can serve to assure the birth family that their wishes are acknowledged and will be honored.