

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Setting and Enforcing Boundaries with Relatives in Kinship Foster and Adoptive Families

September 2016

2.5 Hours Credit

This self-study was developed utilizing concepts from the following sources:

- Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Edler Brown, The Guilford Press, 1995
- Raising Our Children's Children Deborah Doucette-Dudman with Jeffery R. LaCure, Fairview Press, 1996
- "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren" HelpGuide.org
- "Fostering Skills: Boundaries in Foster Care" Alaska Center for Resource Families, Self-Study Course
- "Four Steps to Healthy Parent-Grandparent Relationships" Janada Clark <http://www.janadaclark.com/> 2013
- "How can kinship foster families set boundaries with bio parents during the holidays?" Jasmine, www.fostercareqanda.com 2014
- "Setting Boundaries in Open Adoption" Kathleen Silber, Adoptive Families magazine

This self-study course was developed by John Bennett for the Alaska Center for Resource Families.

If you wish to receive training credit for reading this self-study, please fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire at the back of this course. Return the questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 2.5 hours of training credit. This course is yours to keep for further reference.



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In completing this course, you should be able to:

- *Determine what OCS expects your role to be in family contact.*
- *Identify the limits you want in place regarding interaction with your child's birth parents.*
- *Communicate those limits to your relatives.*
- *Enforce those limits without undermining your relationship to your relatives.*



Introduction

Many children who come through the child protective system or who have been in the custody of the Office of Children's Services are placed with relatives. That means that the birth parents of the children in your home may be very closely related to you. Setting boundaries with relatives who are the birth parents of the children in your care can be challenging. It may be different if you are a licensed foster family than it will be if you are an adoptive family for the child your care for.

Foster families must live with the rules of the Case Plan and Family Contact Plan and will likely be part of the team that helps transition the child back into your relative's home. This has its advantages and disadvantages. You don't get to make the rules, but if the relative doesn't like the rules of the contact they have with their child, you can always fall back on that you are just following the Case Plan or the Family Contact Plan that was set up by OCS. Adoptive families are on their own. They get to decide the amount of contact their child will have with his birth parent, but they have nobody else to take the heat when disgruntled relatives complain.

The first parts of this document are focused on the roles and responsibilities of foster parents, though much of the material will apply to adoptive parents as well. The last section of this self-study will focus on unique situations that adoptive families might face. As you read through this, determine whether the ideas presented apply in your case. Every family is different and you must make decisions based on the specifics of your relationship with your relative.

What do we mean when we talk about setting boundaries?

By boundaries, we mean the rules for interaction between people. Some boundaries are written and others are assumed. Boundaries around personal space, for instance, are written down as law in most societies – for a stranger to enter your home without your permission, would be against the law. However, for many people, relatives and close friends might enter their homes without knocking, and it would not be a problem. Typically they would announce their presence with a loud, “Hello” if nobody were there when they entered. As long as both parties understand what is expected and respect those limits, there should be no problems.

When relationships between people change – when a grandparent becomes a parent to a grandchild and the birth parent loses that role, for instance – boundaries change as well and a great potential for misunderstanding arises. Your role as a parent to a child who had been a grandchild, a niece or nephew, or even a sibling changes dramatically, and sometimes it happens overnight. Therefore, it is important to establish new boundaries as clearly and as quickly as possible. You will have certain things in writing from the Office of Children’s Services, but not everything will be clear to all parties.

The responsibility for making it clear what the boundaries are lies with the new caregiver. Part of your job as a foster or adoptive parent is to explain to the child how the “chain of command” has shifted. The child needs to learn your new role as the authority figure. This will be made much easier if the birth parent backs you up and lets the child know that you are now in the parent role. So it is also your job to work with the birth parent and make it clear what your expectations are and what limits you expect them to honor. Neither of these tasks (with the child nor with the birth parents) will be easy. This self-study will give you some ideas to think about as you begin the task of setting boundaries and limits with your relatives.



Part 1: What are Boundaries?

And What Do They Have To Do With Foster Care?

A boundary, for the purposes of this paper, is a rule of conduct between two parties that is understood by both.

Let us start out by emphasizing that foster parents must have, in writing, what OCS expects regarding visitation and communication within your family. This is called the Family Contact Plan, and it outlines how much contact a parent can have with a child in OCS Custody and under what circumstances. When it comes to family contact, your role as a foster parent is to know what kind of contact is allowed, know what kind of supervision is required, and know your role in that contact. (Note: If this information is given to you verbally by the caseworker, *put it in writing* by writing an email to the worker and asking for confirmation that you understood the

expectations correctly. This will serve as your written record of the plan and back you up in case of disagreement.) In some cases, contact may be left up to your discretion and that means you need to decide what works best for the child and your family.

If you let the child's birth parents know that you intend to follow the guidelines of the Family Contact Plan and you expect them to do so as well, you have set a boundary. This is the easy part. Enforcing the boundary may prove more difficult.

Why is it important to set and enforce clear boundaries when you become a relative caregiver?

Conflict arises when it is unclear what the rules are. Problems also arise when it is unclear whether the rules will be enforced. When we, as foster parents, have clear, healthy boundaries, we are more likely to keep ourselves from burning out and less likely to cross over lines of safety.

If the Case Plan says that the parent can call the child once per week; and your dinner time is from 5:30 to 6:15; and the child is expected to do homework from 6:15 to 7 p.m. and goes to bed at 8:30; then to simply have in writing that the parent is to call once per week is an unclear boundary. If you specify that the parent can call between 3 p.m. (when the child arrives home from school) and 5 p.m. or between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and talk for up to half an hour, then you have a clear boundary.

As a foster parent caring for a child in OCS custody, you also have responsibilities to the state to assist in supporting the caseplan and following the Family Contact Plan. Understand your own feelings and how they can help or hurt a situation. Maybe you are angry at the relative. Or, maybe you are angry at OCS. You may want to help the relative. Or, you may want to punish them. You need to understand your own feelings and not let them get out of control or control how you interact with the birth parents.

Why are boundaries hard to set?

Boundaries are difficult to set because things have changed. Your relationship to the relative whose child you are raising has changed. You have a new role and so does the relative. The old rules no longer apply. The sooner and more completely you both come to an understanding of that fact, the smoother your relationship will be, and the better life will be for the child.

You might not be used to taking charge with this person and he or she might not be used to your taking charge either. You need to rise to the occasion. You are going to have to take charge. The Family Contact Plan and OCS can be a big help in this area. In most cases, the boundaries you hope to establish involve being in compliance with what OCS expects. This will vary from family to family. Your relative may be very respectful of your caring for her child, or there may be difficult feelings around the arrangement. You may have a very good relationship with the relative, or you may not even know the relative very well.

Rules around the sanctity of your home may also have changed. A daughter or son who used to just drop by whenever they felt like it may now have to make appointments and stay within the guidelines of the Family Contact Plan as set forth by OCS. Other relatives who want contact with the child may raise concerns and leave you wondering how to stay within the Family Contact Plan and your own comfort zone without hurting feelings. It can be hard to know exactly where to draw the line.

Your relationship with the child has likely changed too, and you can no longer be the grandparent or auntie who always spoils the child. You may now need to be the disciplinarian and the limit setter and the one who says, “No.” That may be an adjustment for both you and the child. It is important that you both understand clearly what your new roles will be. That might take some adjustment, but the sooner you establish this, the easier it will be for you both.

Why are boundaries hard to enforce?

Your relative is being asked to give up some privilege he or she previously took for granted. He or she will want to find out if they really have to. When your relative crosses a boundary without a significant consequence, it becomes more tempting to try to cross again. So you have to be diligent from the beginning.

When the person you are setting boundaries with is a relative and a loved one, it is natural to want to avoid rigid enforcement of rules. It is easy to think that if you are soft with your relative, your relationship will be smoother. There may be some truth in that – being rigid and cold with someone will never make your connection stronger. Nor will giving in, giving up, or backing down from the plan earn you respect and confidence from your relative. But being firm is something else. Your relative is more likely to respect you and follow the plan if she knows that you are willing to stand firm and keep to the plan. If a relative wants to bring a friend to a visit, for instance, or keep the child overnight, and that is not consistent with the Family Contact Plan, let the relative know right away. Remind them that you both agreed to abide by the written plan. Be prepared to hold your ground if such situations arise. That may put you in an uncomfortable spot at times. So let’s look at how you can set good boundaries from the start and enforce them when needed.



Part 2: Setting Good Boundaries from the Start

Some Ideas for Setting and Enforcing Boundaries

Make sure both sides know what the plan is.

- **Be sure you have a copy of the Family Contact Plan** and understand the guidelines around visitation as set forth. You can obtain this information from the OCS caseworker.

- **Set “the new rules” in writing. Make copies and have all parties** (the adults in your household and the other adults interacting with the children) **sign and date them.** Each party gets a copy signed by all parties. If your relative tends to dominate your relationship, it can be hard to hold your ground. Having boundaries in writing with both parties’ signatures can make it easier for you to stand by what was agreed to.
- **Write rules in clear, simple, language.** Be sure to read them over carefully before showing them to the relatives. They must be clear and unambiguous. The clearer your boundaries are, the easier it will be for your relative to maintain them, and the easier it will be for you to defend them. This will lead to less conflict and easier going for both you and your relative.

Use positive communication.

- When possible and appropriate, **avoid making your relative defensive.** If the case plan says she can have the child for two hours every Saturday, and the relative has not been good about keeping it to two hours, have the social worker intervene. If the social worker can be the decision maker, then you can be simply enforcing the pre-established rules.
- **Look for ways to interact positively with the relative.** Every positive interaction and every time you are able to say “yes” to your relative is like credit in a “good-will account.” When the bank is full of good-will, an occasional “no” will not deplete the account, and your positive relationship with the relative should remain intact. But if your response is always negative, you will struggle every step of the way.
- **Communicate with the relative prior to visits and other interactions.** The written rules are a form of communication, but a phone call during which you remind the relative that you’ll see them “at noon tomorrow” can prevent the kind of situations that tend to drive a wedge between parties.

Be prepared to enforce boundaries.

- If your boundaries include consequences for non-compliance, **be sure that the consequences are enforceable.** For instance, if the relative fails to show up for a scheduled appointment with your foster child, you should report that to the OCS worker, but you cannot curb their future visiting privileges as a consequence. Only the Case Plan team can do that. If the child is your adopted child, ask yourself if you really want to drastically curb visitation as a consequence. That punishes the child as well as the parent.
- **Enforce boundaries consistently from the start.** If your child’s birth parent thinks he or she can ignore a rule that you have agreed to, he or she is likely to test that notion. Any time someone can ignore a boundary with no consequence, it becomes harder for you to make them believe that they can’t get away with it again.
- If you have a partner who is less likely to be swayed by the birth parent than you are, then **try to have that person handle the conflicts.**

- Be prepared to say, “**Let me think about that and get back to you.**” This gives you time to think and to plan what you will say (or practice how you will say “no”).

Take Responsibility for Yourself

- **Be a model of the behavior you hope to see in the relative.** If you expect them to be prompt and to do what they say they will do, then you must be prompt and do what you say you will do. If you expect them to not say negative things about you to or in front of the child, then don't you say negative things about them to or in front of the child.
- **Know your own buttons.** Some people are good at pushing buttons. If you have things that tend to annoy you, such people are skilled at finding that out and exploiting it. If your relative is one of those people, be prepared for it and don't fall into traps.
- **Be prepared to live with a certain level of discomfort over boundaries issues.** If you are a foster parent, you are part of the team that is preparing the birth parent for reunification. When possible, turn conflicts into teaching moments. For example, if a parent is fifteen minutes late bringing a child back from a visit, praise them for spending time with the child before reminding them that you expect them to be more prompt, and that the case worker will ask how visits went. But fifteen minutes might not be worth developing hard feelings over, and you want to have a close relationship with this relative after the child returns to her or his care. This might sound inconsistent with our advice to “enforce boundaries consistently from the start,” but sometimes you need to pick your battles. Remind them and document incidents, so you can address it if it becomes a bigger problem; but you don't need to make more of it than is warranted.
- **If the relative brings the child home from visits, without having fed them, bite your lip and pack a snack for the child to eat next time.** If this might be a “teaching moment,” then teach the relative that a young child needs to eat every so often, but it's probably not worth bickering over.



On Recordkeeping

It is helpful to document all the interactions you or the child has with his relative, both positive and negative. It becomes even more important if those contacts with the birth parent are difficult, harmful or upsetting to the child, or if the parent is not following the case plan. Here are some ideas of how to effectively keep notes.

- ❖ Get a spiral notebook or a bound notebook and record the date and, if possible, the time of day for each event you document. Record the nature and essential content of every interaction you have with the relative. “On Thursday, March 12, 2015, Marcella told me that she would be by at 10 a.m. that Saturday (March 14) to pick up Sandy. The next time I heard from her was on Thursday, March 19, when she said, “Oh, you know, I was out looking for a job.”
- ❖ Record any promises the relative makes. Record the appointments she keeps and the ones she doesn’t keep. Note school activities she attends and ones she doesn’t. Record any threats made. If there are times she is allowed to visit, note what time she comes, what time she leaves, and what took place during the visit.
- ❖ In the same book, or in a separate one, record the child’s reactions before, during and after visits. Record changes in the child’s mood and behavior. Record comments the child makes at any time about the parent. Don’t judge or interpret what the child says. Write down the exact words.
- ❖ Keep in mind that these records can help demonstrate to the reunification team that the birth parent is making progress or not making progress. Reviewing the records can help remind you to let the case worker and CASA or GAL know that the birth parent “attended the parent-teacher conference and consistently showed up for scheduled visits, and her daughter seems more comfortable around the visits now than she did at first.” That is valuable information for the team trying to decide what the long term plan is for the child.



Part 3: Problem Solving

Areas That Can Cause Conflicts in Families

Setting up good boundaries and communicating them to the birth parent is an important start to keeping things going smoothly with Family Contact and your interactions with your relative. But sometimes things get difficult. The following are common areas of conflict between relative caregivers and relative birth parents followed by some ideas of how to handle the situation.

Conflict Area: *You and the birth parent disagree over how to handle discipline.*

This child was removed from the birth parent's home because that home was not safe. The child was placed in your home because your home was deemed by the state to be safe. You as a foster parent need to follow state regulations on discipline and positive parenting. How to discipline the child is not an issue that is up for negotiation. You decide.

Conflict Area: *One adult is badmouthing the other adult in front of the child.*

This can be a hard one to control, but you can talk to the birth parent about how this isn't good for the child. You can ask the birth parent to sign a contract that says that neither of you will speak badly of the other to or in front of the child. If you are foster parents (as opposed to adoptive parents), bring this up with the case worker.

Conflict Area: *Birth parents make promises to the child they cannot keep.*

When birth parents make promises to the child that they either cannot or do not keep, it is hurtful to the child. You must be diligent in confronting the birth parent when you know this has happened. Again, if you are foster parents, document this and bring this to the attention of the case worker. If it continues, you may need to supervise visits and monitor phone calls to prevent it.

Conflict Area: *Birth parent gives inappropriate gifts to the child.*

If you don't want your young child to have a cell phone, and the birth parent gives one as a gift, it puts you in a hard place. If the birth parent often fails to show up for appointed visits and then provides an elaborate gift the next time, it might make you uncomfortable. Talk to the birth parent about this and why you have a problem with it. It might not be practical to list every type of gift that would make you feel uncomfortable, but if gift giving gets out of

hand, you can ask that gifts not be given or that they be run by you beforehand. If you are a foster parent, talk to the case worker for ideas.

Conflict Area: *Visits start late or end late. Birth parent does not follow the Family Contact Plan.*

If visit times are not specified in the Case Plan or in a written contract you have with the birth parent, then get them in writing. Determine beforehand how you plan to handle lateness at either end. Give this some serious thought. What consequences are you going to apply that don't end up hurting the child? Do you really want to quibble about five or ten minutes? If birth parents are late for visits, you can make clear that you will wait no longer than 15 or 20 minutes and then continue on with the other things you had planned that day. If the plan is for reunification and the birth parent is doing well, you may even ask the social worker if longer time can be given to the parent if it seems that the visits are not long enough. If it is a chronic problem, you can always keep a record of how late a birth parent was in bringing a child back and make those times cumulative – 15 minutes here, 20 minutes here could add up to 35 minutes they owe you—but consider that this might escalate bad feelings if done in a punitive fashion. Communicate the expectations, keep records of chronic problems, and do let the case worker know if things start to slide. Ask for mediation between you and the birth parent if you can't work out these issues on your own.

Conflict Area: *Birth parent puts sensitive family information on Facebook.*

If the birth parent posts information on Facebook or other social media that makes you uncomfortable, talk to her or him about it. If OCS guidelines for foster care are being breached, let the birth parent know and insist that the posting be changed. If you are an adoptive parent, let the birth parent know how it makes you feel and ask that changes be made.



Part 4: In Adoption

What Changes, What Stays the Same

As indicated in the introduction, setting boundaries in a kinship adoption is different than setting boundaries in a kinship foster home. These differences spring chiefly from the fact that there is no Case Plan or Family Contact Plan. When you adopt a child, in the eyes of the law, it is as if that child is your own. You, as the legal parent, can decide what kind of contact a child will have with other people. There is no OCS involvement that tells you what you need to do. The exception may be if there were some retained privileges by the birth parent if they consented to the adoption. But even those you have to agree to as part of the adoption so you should know what those are before the adoption becomes final. Since you are adopting a relative, it is probable that there will continue to be some kind of contact between your child and the birth parent.

If you transition from foster care to adoption, consider keeping the same rules in place. You will not have the authority of OCS to fall back on, but if you and the relative have been living by a particular set of rules – and if those rules are to your liking – let the relative know that you intend to continue to live by those standards. You may wish to take the child’s wishes and preferences into account as well. Your child may want fewer visits or more contact. Again, you are the final authority to decide what is in the best interest of the child you care for. The birth parent should back you up as the authority. As in any family that has conflicts, you may wish to seek a family therapist or mediator to help resolve problems or conflicts that may arise in the future.

Once you adopt, you are the legal parent and are able to make decisions around contact with the child. In some situations, adoptive relative parents might decide to let the child’s birth parent live in their home. This situation works best when the adults are very clear about expectations around behaviors, contributing to the household, and responsibilities. At the beginning of this self-study, we talked about how when relationships change, there can be sources of conflict. That applies here when adult children or other relatives live with their parents or relatives. The following areas are often typically sources of conflict:

- *When they are expected to be home*
- *Whom they may bring home*
- *With whom they may associate*
- *Alcohol and drug use*
- *Looking for a job*
- *Keeping the home neat and participating in housekeeping activities*
- *Paying rent*
- *Other money issues*

As indicated earlier, one way to start out from the beginning is to **have clear communication about expectations and to set the rules in writing.**

Other guidelines include:

- Be consistent with your expectations and rules.
- Keep the child's best interest in mind. You are now responsible for the child in your care and he or she needs to be at the center of your decisions.
- List consequences only if you are willing and able to enforce them. This means if a consequence is that they have to move out, you have indicated in writing how soon, and you are prepared to follow through.
- If you have a partner who is stronger willed with this relative than you are, have that partner be the one to confront the relative if rules are broken.
- Keep in mind that if you allow a relative to live with you, that it is still your home and you have the right to set reasonable expectations so that everyone living in the home is safe and comfortable. This means you are not obligated to meet the demands of the adult relative in your home at a cost to your partner or the child or children you are now responsible for.
- You are not responsible for fixing or rescuing your relative from bad choices, especially if they put you in an unsafe or dangerous situation. This means:
 - *You do not have to bail your relative out of financial difficulties.*
 - *You do not have to tolerate drug or alcohol use in your home.*
 - *You do not have to allow them to bring people you do not know or do not approve of into your home.*

TEST