

Empowering Change: Minnesota

This publication was developed by Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative in collaboration with the Birth and Foster Parent Partnership and the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, with support from Casey Family Programs.

In 2018, Mikala found herself in an extremely challenging situation: striving to be the best mother possible for her children while struggling with a substance use disorder and domestic violence. As a result, Child Protective Services intervened and Mikala's children were placed with a foster family.

"My rock bottom was when my kids were taken away from me," said Mikala. "I was literally losing everything."

For Mikala, and other struggling parents in Minnesota, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. In October 2017, Minnesota adopted the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) of the Youth Law Center, offering a supportive path that redefines foster care and creates a stronger line of communication between biological parents and foster families.

Mikala's two children were placed with foster parents, Leah and Kyle, who were relatively new to fostering when they received the call from Carver County child protective services.

"After the call, we were worried," said Leah. "We didn't know if this person was dangerous or not. But we agreed to meet in person for the kid's sake. We trusted the QPI process."

The QPI support team all met in a parking lot and nerves were high since this type of meeting was new to everyone involved.



Mikala and her three children.



Mikala and case worker Lynn embrace.

Despite the initial uncertainty, Leah and Mikala immediately connected and embraced. This was the start of a two-year bond and nurturing birth-foster parent connection that positively contributed to the wellbeing of Mikala's children.

Reflecting on that parking lot moment, Mikala said she didn't want anyone to see her cry.

"I just let my kids both know that they'll be taken care of and they can call Mommy any time."

Before they said goodbye, Leah told Mikala that they were going to keep her kids safe and guide them as best they can with her help.

"That's a hard day to think about without crying," said Leah.

Establishing early connections between foster family members and biological parents yields tremendous impact. QPI's national data collection project, Quality Parenting Outreach, which involves surveying all parents directly, has shown that families who have initial supported contact within the first 48 hours of foster care dramatically increase the chances of positive family reunification.

Initially launched in Minnesota by private foster care agency AspireMN, several counties and social service agencies joined the QPI-MN movement supported by the Department of Human Services. Key Minnesota QPI initiatives to improve foster care outcomes include practice and policy changes supporting a healthy relationship between birth and foster parents, and regular communication with family members to support child development and nurture a sense of belonging.

Minnesota committed to specific QPI practices in their foster home development and supporting partner relationships, such as:

1) Agencies supporting meaningful and enduring relationships for children and youth by utilizing foster parents who agree that the primary goal is to help children maintain and develop relationships with supportive, caring adults in their lives. Agencies engage and license caregivers who are initially open to and willing to have increased, ongoing communication with the birth parent. Additionally, foster parents are supported in practices such as sharing pictures with birth families, setting up virtual or in-person with friends or extended family, coordinating opportunities for the child to spend time in their originating community, encouraging family and friends to attend important events of the child, inviting the child's family to activities, planning transitions that maintain relationships, and maintaining relationships after out of home placement when the child is interested.

2) Excellent communication and information sharing among birth parents, foster parents, and child welfare workers. This includes a commitment to ensure foster parents receive sufficient information about the children and youth in their care and ensuring foster parents are engaged in an active communication loop with all the individuals and parties involved in the out-of-home placement experience; and

3) Creating, regular opportunities for foster parents to share the needs and concerns of the children and youth in their care to support their voice being heard, and to ensure involvement in decision-making processes.

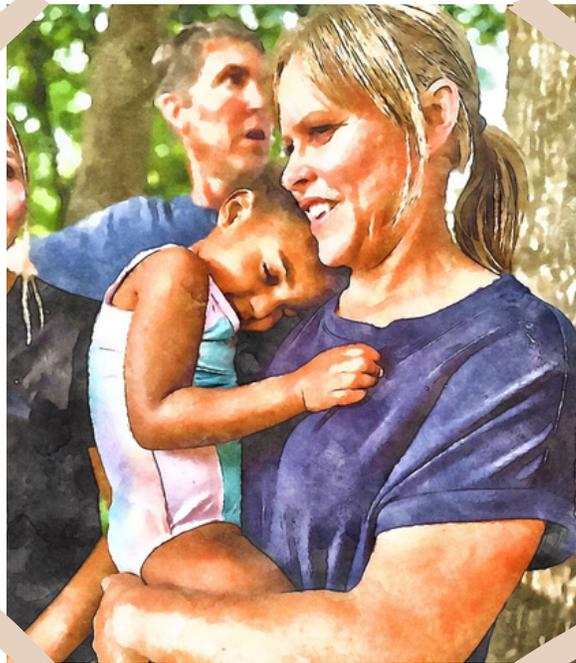


One of Mikala's children sits down to lunch.

“This is not a type of relationship that ends when the courts say so. We’ll always be in each other’s lives helping each other.”

- Leah

“I can’t stress enough how special Mikala is,” said Leah. “Yes, she has made a few missteps, but that doesn’t mean she can’t change her ways. She is the best mom for these kids. We were very fortunate that she is who she is.”



Leah and one of Mikala's children.

Over time, the connection between the foster parents and the birth mother became stronger and evolved into the foster parents dropping off the children at Mikala’s home for family time, pictures and videos of priceless moments, and shared trips to the park. Mikala’s children benefited immensely from the merging of these two worlds, being integrated and connected with their mom’s life. It lowered the trauma typically presented, kept the mom in her parental role, and made it a fluid practice to go back and forth between homes.

“The kids were just wanting to intertwine their lives,” said Leah. “They just got so much comfort when Mikala and I were talking. They loved that because our two worlds were coming together.”

Over two years, there were times of skepticism on both sides about the ultimate outcome, but Mikala and Leah worked through those times by continuing to keep the children’s best interests at the forefront.

“Mikala did a fantastic job of putting her kids first and letting QPI’s progression happen,” said Leah. “And this is not a type of relationship that ends when the courts say so. We’ll always be in each other’s lives helping each other.”

QPI believes excellent parenting with strong, positive relationships is the best intervention we can offer children to enable them to heal as they grow up to become adults.

"I struggled with believing I was a good mom because of what happened. My willingness to fight and just working with everyone – that's what brought my kids home," said Mikala.

Her perseverance and love for her children allowed her to rewrite her narrative through QPI state initiatives. Not as a statistic of the foster care system, or a victim of domestic violence, but as a proud mother now with permanent custody of her three kids. Mikala's now completing her degree at Minneapolis Community College and looking to be an advocate for other struggling parents. She's a beacon for success, an example that open communication and QPI practices can help improve foster care outcomes.

The success of agency investment into developing early relationships like the ones between Mikala, Leah, and Kyle resulted in the Minnesota legislature ratifying QPI field practice into statute in 2020. Minnesota Statutes Section 260C.219, Subdivision 6 now requires agencies to try to coordinate a call between birth and foster families at the time of placement. This state policy change was based on the recognition that children do best when there is strengthened communication and relationships between the people who care for them.

All individuals and agencies connected to the foster care system are welcomed partners for ongoing QPI-MN work.



Mikala's and Leah's families continue to spend time together.

Practical resources & Additional reading

For system leaders

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership:

A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sec3f22c53ca04100a128ff2369207b82>)

For parents and caregivers

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership:

A Relationship Building Guide offers practical tips to help build partnerships and strengthen communication between the important adults in a child's life while in care and after.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sfbf4965b0cb04a4cb3aee4a034aa2042>)

For case workers

A one-page "user's guide" for how child welfare agency leaders and staff may consider introducing and using the guide.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/s0a552c5927fb4fc39b63ea0cea553ab8>)

