

fostering perspectives

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Sponsored by the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

Facing facts

We all know our child welfare system isn't perfect. If you're like most people working in this system, you're willing to take a few imperfections (or more than a few) if it means a chance to make a positive difference in the lives of children and their families.

To make the biggest possible impact sometimes you need to face facts, to know the "good, the

bad, and the ugly." After all, you can solve problems and overcome hurdles so much better when you know what they are.

In this spirit, this issue of the newsletter aims to provide you with a realistic look at some important aspects of foster care and adoption in North Carolina, including our performance on key indicators, the disproportionate

representation of African Americans in foster care, the influence of our consumer society on adoption, the lingering effects of trauma on children, and more.

Whatever your role is in the child welfare system, we salute you for your dedication and your hard work, and we hope this issue supports you as you continue to make a difference.

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By the numbers: Foster care in North Carolina

Everyone connected with the child welfare system should have a sense of where we are and what's on the horizon when it comes to foster care. To update your knowledge, this article compares North Carolina to the nation in a few key areas.

How Many Kids are in Care?

In 2005 there were approximately 513,000 children in foster care in the United States. That's roughly 7 out of every 1,000 American children (ChildTrends, 2007).

The risk of being in care is not as great in North Carolina as in the U.S. as a whole. For example, in 2004 approximately 5 in every 1,000 North Carolina children were in foster care. Nevertheless, in that year we had the 16th largest foster care population in the U.S., with the children in care in our state representing 2% of all the kids in foster care nationally (Pew, 2005).

Cause for Concern?

Nationally, the size of the foster care population is decreasing. Although the number of American children in foster care rose steadily through most of the 1990s, it peaked in 1999, at 567,000, and has declined since then (ChildTrends, 2007).

North Carolina does not reflect this trend. As the Figure 1 illustrates, since 2003 the number of children in care in our state has

increased each year. In February 2007 there were 11,436 children in foster care in North Carolina (NCDSS, 2007a). This rise cannot be fully explained by increases in our state's child population.

This increase in the number of North Carolina children in foster care is puzzling if you consider that during this same period the number of children receiving involuntary child welfare services in our state actually decreased. As Figure 2 illustrates, the combined number of maltreatment substantiations and findings of "services needed" has steadily declined since state fiscal year (SFY) 2002-2003.

Because the decision to place children in foster care is made on a case-by-case basis, it would not be accurate to assume that a decline in mandatory services would necessarily result in a decline in the number of children placed in foster care.

However, the fact that North Carolina's numbers are going up while overall U.S. numbers are going down does raise some questions. Are families in North Carolina struggling with more severe issues than other families nationwide? Has something changed in our child welfare system that would affect foster care placement?

At present we do not have a comprehensive explanation, but it is something the Division of Social Services is working to

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Figure 1

Children in Foster Care in North Carolina, 2003-2006

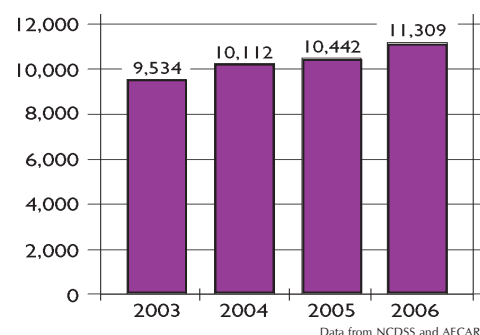
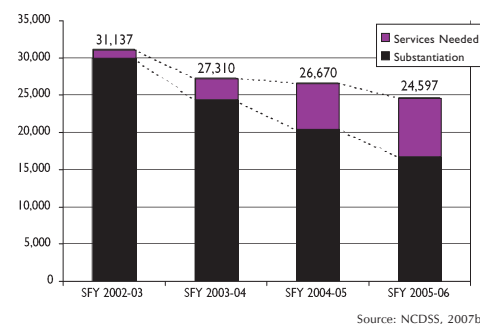


Figure 2

Total NC Children Substantiated or Services Needed (Unduplicated)



By the numbers: Foster care in NC

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understand. We encourage readers and their agencies to reflect on this issue as well, and to ask questions such as: How do your agency's foster care placement rates compare with the state's? If they follow the same general upward trend, why do you think that is?

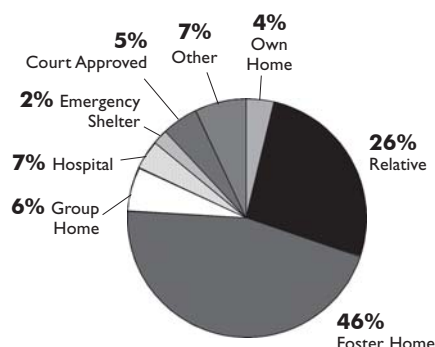
We believe that foster care placement is a necessary and helpful intervention for many families. But we also know that if it is unwarranted this intervention can cause harm. We owe it to families to monitor our numbers to make sure that we act appropriately to achieve positive outcomes.

Where Are Kids Placed?

Preliminary estimates tell us that across the U.S. in 2005, nearly half (46%) of all foster children lived in foster family homes with non-relatives. Nearly a quarter (24%) lived in family foster homes with relatives—often known as kinship care. Eighteen percent of foster children lived in group homes or institutions, 4% lived in pre-adoptive families, and the rest lived in other types of facilities (ChildTrends, 2007).

Figure 3

Pattern of Initial Placement in NC SFY 05-06



Source: NCDSS, 2007c

North Carolina resembles the nation when it comes to where children are placed. For example, of the 6,074 children who entered foster care in SFY 2005-06, 46% were initially placed in non-relative foster family homes and 26% entered kinship care. Figure 3 provides more detail (NCDSS, 2007c).

How Long Do Kids Stay?

North Carolina does as well or better than the nation when it comes to the length of time children spend in foster care. Nationally in 2003, the median length of time children spent in foster care was 17.6 months (AFCARS, 2006a). By comparison, the median length of stay in foster care in our state that year was 14.0 months (USDHHS, 2006).

Data from the Division (NCDSS, 2007c) tell us that the 5,262 North Carolina children who entered foster care during SFY 02-03 left care at the following rates:

- 47% left foster care before one year elapsed:
 - 16% left within 90 days
 - 12% left between 90 and 180 days
 - 19% left between 180 and 360 days
- 26% left foster care between one year and two years:
 - 9% left between 360 and 450 days
 - 7% left between 450 and 540 days
 - 10% left between 540 and 720 days
- 13% left foster care between two and three years
- 14% remained in care after three years

Where Do They Go?

Where do children go when they leave foster care? Preliminary estimates indicate that nationally in 2003, 55% of the children leaving foster care were reunified with their parents or primary caretakers, 11% were placed with relatives, 18% were adopted, 8% were eman-

cipated, 4% entered a guardianship arrangement, 2% were transferred to another agency, and 1% ran away (AFCARS, 2006b).

According to federal data (USDHHS, 2006), the outcomes for North Carolina children leaving foster care in 2003 were similar, although children in our state were more likely to leave care through guardianship (11%) and adoption (23%) than the national average.

To Learn More

We have managed to touch upon only a few of the important numbers related to foster care in North Carolina. For a list of sources you can use to learn more about foster care in North Carolina and in the U.S., please refer to the list in the sidebar below.

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Mission. *Fostering Perspectives* exists to promote the professional development of North Carolina's child welfare workers and foster and adoptive parents and to provide a forum where the people involved in the child welfare system can exchange ideas about foster care and adoption in our state.

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References. See the online version of this issue for references cited in this issue.

Resources for Learning More about Foster Care Outcomes



What Do You Know About YOUR County?

Curious about the experiences of the children served by your NC county department of social services? Consult the "county experiences reports" made available by the NC Division of Social Services in partnership with the UNC-CH School of Social Work. Go to <<http://ssw.unc.edu/cw>> and click on your county on the map to see how your local DSS agency compares to similar sized agencies and to the state as a whole on a wide range of measures.

Other Resources

ChildTrends Data Bank. (2007). *Foster care*. Washington, DC: Author. <www.childtrendsdatabank.org>

NC Division of Social Services. (2007). *Child welfare central registry statistics: Child abuse statistics summary*. Raleigh, NC: Author. <www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/stats/docs/Annualtotals%202006.xls>

Pecora, et al. (2005). *Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*. Seattle, WA. <www.casey.org>

Stukes-Chipungu, S. & Bent-Goodley, T.B. (2004). Meeting the challenges of contemporary foster care. *The Future of Children*, 14(1) 75-93. <www.futureofchildren.org>

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Child welfare outcomes 2003: Annual report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cwo03/>



Race and foster care

"More than half of the 500,000 children in foster care on any day in America come from ethnic minority families even though children from minority communities make up less than half the children in this country. . . . At every age level, black children are more likely to be placed in foster care than Whites or Hispanics."

These facts, presented by Robert B. Hill in his extensively researched *Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update*, are not really news. Concerning and even alarming, yes. But not news.

We have known for decades that there are more children of color living in foster care, especially African Americans, than would be expected based solely on their numbers in the general population. For example, in the U.S. in 2005, non-Hispanic black children made up approximately 15% of all children under age 18 but accounted for 32% of foster children (ChildTrends, 2007). The term used to describe this phenomenon is "disproportionality."

The figure at right, from Hill's report, illustrates the racial/ethnic disproportionality in foster care in 2000. In the figure, if a group's number in the far right column is less than 1.0, it is underrepresented relative to its size in the general population; if it is more than 1.0, the group is overrepresented.

In line with national trends, nonwhite children are disproportionately represented in NC's foster care population. In 2003, nonwhite children comprised 54.1% of children in foster care in our state (USDHHS, 2006), although they made up only 30.6% of the state's population between the ages 0-17 (NC Data Ctr, 2006).

Why are so many children of color in the child welfare system? Hill says three explanations have been proposed:

Parent and family risk factor theories hold that minorities are overrepresented because they have disproportionate needs. The idea is that these children come from families that are more likely to have risk factors—such as unemployment, teen parenthood, poverty, substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence, and mental illness—that result in high levels of maltreatment.

Community risk factor theories. Hill says these theories assert that overrepresentation has less to do with race or class and more to do with residing in neighborhoods and communities that have many

risk factors—such as high levels of poverty, welfare assistance, unemployment, homelessness, single-parent families, and crime and street violence—that make residents more visible to surveillance from public authorities.

Organizational and systemic factor theories contend that overrepresentation results from the decision-making processes of CPS agencies, the cultural insensitivity and biases of workers, governmental policies, and institutional or structural racism.

Which of these theories is correct? According to Hill we lack the empirical evidence needed to answer this question because almost all studies have focused on the presence or absence of disproportionality, not its cause. That said, Hill does emphasize the general consensus among researchers that race is an important factor at many key stages in the child welfare system, including reporting, investigation, substantiation, placement, and exit from care. Hill concludes by cautioning us against a rush to judgment. Until further research is done, we cannot be certain what role—if any—bias or racism play.

No matter how you explain it, there is no denying that disproportionality and race in general have a huge influence on the child welfare system. Child welfare professionals owe it to themselves and the families they serve to learn all they can on the subject, and to continually work to increase their cultural competency.

Hill's report is an excellent resource for this. In addition to disproportionality it explores in depth what the research has to say about race and patterns of child maltreatment, disparities in treatment, and more. You can find it at <www.racemattersconsortium.org>.

Disproportionality for U.S. Children in Foster Care by Race/Ethnicity, 2000

Race/Ethnicity	% of U.S. Population	% of U.S. Kids in Foster Care	Disproportionality Rate
Total Children	100.0	100.0	N/A
Non-Hispanic Whites	60.9	46.0	0.76
Non-Hispanic Blacks	15.1	36.6	2.43
Non-Hispanic Indians/AN	1.2	2.6	2.16
Non-Hispanic Asians/PI	3.6	1.4	0.39
Hispanics	17.0	13.5	0.79

Source: 2000 Census and 2000 AFCARS data in Hill, 2006

Analyzing the Economic Costs and Benefits of Transracial Adoption

A new study on transracial adoption from foster care found that a child adopted transracially spends less time as a legal orphan than the average, adopted African American child. The study also found that transracial adoptions occur at a younger age and sooner after the termination of parental rights than same-race adoptions.

Using data from the Children's Bureau's Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for 1996–2003, the study's authors show that adoptions of African-American and other children of color have

The study found that although adoptions of children of color have increased since the 1990s, black children continue to spend more time as legal orphans.

increased since the 1990s, as have transracial adoptions. However, Black children continue to spend more time as legal orphans, relative to other children. This occurs despite the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions, which were enacted to prevent discrimination in the placement of children on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

Using the AFCARS data, the authors conducted an economic analysis to investigate the costs of restricting placements by race. Results show that transracial adoptions have a greater net social and economic benefit due to reduced waiting time

to adoption and fewer funds being spent on same-race adoptive parent recruitment.

The authors conclude that greater emphasis on transracial placements and more vigorous enforcement of MEPA would result in gains for African American children.

The full article, "Transracial Adoption of Black Children: An Economic Analysis," by Mary Hansen and Daniel Pollack, can be found on the website of the Berkeley Electronic Press: <<http://law.bepress.com/expresso/eps/1942/>>

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Matching children with the right foster family

by Staff at the Durham County Department of Social Services

Radio and TV constantly run ads about the need for foster parents. Yet there are foster parents who have been licensed for six months and still haven't had any children placed in their home. Similarly, there are experienced foster parents who have cared for a number of children but who have been waiting for a placement for some time. How can this be?

The foster care staff at the Durham County Department of Social Services got together to explain why foster parents sometimes find themselves in this situation.

There are a multitude of reasons that foster parents may not have had a placement. In an effort to ensure that children are matched to the foster home that can best meet their needs, agencies must consider many factors. Some of these include the following.

Attitude toward Birth Families

The initial plan for all children coming into foster care is reunification with their parents or family members. Foster parents must be able to participate in shared parenting and assist in reunification efforts. This may require the admittedly difficult task of letting go of attachments that you have made with the children. Foster parents' attitudes toward birth parents, shared parenting, and reunification can have a significant influence on the well-being of children in foster care and on the ultimate outcome for the family. If you are not supportive or have hostile attitudes toward birth families, shared parenting, or reunification, agencies may be less likely to place children in your home.

Your Stated Preferences

As you remember from your pre-service training, foster care is a situational loss like divorce or loss of a job. The agency never knows from day to day which families they will investigate or which children will come into care. One day it might be a baby, the next day it could be a ten-year-old boy or a sixteen-year-old girl.

As a result, it is generally true that the more restrictions you place on the type and number of children you want, the longer you will wait. If you have expressed certain preferences as to the types of children that you will care for, this could delay placements for you. For example, if you limit yourself to infants, it may be six or seven months before an infant is taken into custody.

Agencies want to have homes waiting for children, not children waiting for homes.

Even if the agency does have an infant that needs foster care, many foster parents effectively close their homes to these children by saying they won't care for children who are medically fragile, HIV-exposed, or drug-exposed. Because there is such a large demand for healthy infants, the wait may be many months or years.

Role in Past Disruptions

Although foster care agencies recognize that sometimes disruptions are unavoidable, the history of placement disruptions in your home is a major consideration in making future placements.

Some disruptions occur despite your very best efforts to meet a child's needs. In such a situation, the agency will continue to work with you if you allow for a planned and positive transition. The agency recognizes that you have the best interest of the child in mind and will probably call you again.

However, the agency's confidence in your caretaking abilities may be diminished if you ask for a child to be removed immediately or without making your very best effort to work through all problem situations.

Location

Children who come into foster care have often experienced many losses. The Multiple Response System and initiatives such as Family to Family try to prevent additional losses by placing children in a foster home in or near their own neighborhood. This allows the children to maintain some of their connections, the most important one being to their school or child care provider.

Maintaining connections with schoolmates during a time in which everything else is dramatically changing is essential for children. If we do not have foster homes available in the child's school district, we may ask their foster parents to provide transportation to their school even if it is not close by.

Ability and Willingness to Provide Transportation

Some children have frequent appointments for therapy, medical exams, visitation, school activities, etc. If you do not own a reliable vehicle, you need to find other ways to assure that these appointments are kept. Social workers have many cases and cannot take every child to every appointment. Moreover, the participation by foster parents in some of these activities may be very important.

Ideas about Adoption

Many foster parents express an interest in adoption. Foster parents who *only* want to adopt will only get called when a biological parent relinquishes their child into social services custody. This does not happen very often. Foster parents who only wish to adopt may prefer to work with a private agency.

Financial Stability

Caring for children can be expensive. Agencies want the foster parents to be financially stable before they begin caring for foster children. Foster parents who consistently ask for food, have their phone disconnected, and request money for diapers and formula may make the agency question their ability to care for a child. The agency does not want to put a serious financial burden on a foster family. If the agency determines that you have insufficient income to support your own needs, it will not place children in your care.

Your Home's Capacity

Because of state policies about sleeping arrangements, if you only have one bedroom available and your fourteen-year-old son will share the room, you will only receive calls for boys aged six and older.

Many sibling groups come into care. Our goal is to place siblings together if at all possible. The agency will look for a home that can accommodate siblings or at least homes in the same neighborhood so siblings can remain as geographically close as possible.

Conclusion

Being a foster parent is an honorable and rewarding experience. It is not easy to care for someone else's child. It takes an amount of time, energy, skill, and expense that many people do not anticipate. Working with a public agency can also be demanding. The many social workers, guardians ad litem, school personnel, therapists, and doctors can cause quite a conflict in scheduling, not to mention the continued court proceedings and the frustration of missed phone calls.

But with patience and endurance, foster parents can prevail and make a real difference in the lives of children and their families in North Carolina. Remember, it's all about meeting the needs of the child.

At any given time, 33% of U.S. licensed foster homes have no children placed in them.

—Stukes Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004

The frustrations of waiting for a placement

by Becky Burmester, foster parent

As a veteran foster parent (two decades and counting), I am familiar with licensed foster parents whose homes have remained empty. These foster parents frequently contact their social workers seeking placements, yet no children are placed in their homes.

They ask themselves: Why is this happening? There is supposed to be such a need for foster families. The other people in my MAPP class have foster children in their homes. What's wrong with me and my family?

To people in this position, the first thing I would say is that placements are subjective. Agencies work with the foster parents that are easiest to work with most frequently. Placements must also meet the needs of the child. The foster parent's need for a placement is secondary at best.

If you've been waiting for a placement a long time, look closely at the profile you have presented to your agency. What types of children, coming from what

When time passes and no children are placed in your home, you can't help but wonder why.

types of situations have you indicated that you could feel comfortable parenting? If you have real anger with birth families, you are unlikely to receive placements unless TPR has already occurred. If

you want children of only a certain age or ethnicity and children dealing only with specific issues, placements may be few and far between.

What do you have to offer children, birth families, and your agency? Are you eager to work at shared parenting? Are you able to be non-judgmental of birth families? Are you flexible as to the type of child or children you will foster? If you already have children of your own, how carefully have you addressed the impact new kids will have? What about the impact of temporary new kids?

Foster parenting is really a rather strange vocation. The job description goes something like this: raise someone else's children for as long as necessary, work closely with the parents to assist in the children being able to leave

your home, identify needs the children have, bug other people to help get the needs met. If the children cannot return to the birth family, help them transition to permanency in your home or someone else's home.

Yes, there is a tremendous need for good foster homes, because agencies want to have homes waiting for children, not children waiting for homes. Your home may be the perfect placement for only a very few children and those children may not be in the foster care system at this time. Be patient!

In the Meantime . . .

If you find yourself waiting for a placement, here are some things you can do in the meantime.

Respite. Offer to provide respite care for your agency. You can provide a welcome breather to another foster family and get a taste of fostering at the same time. Respite can be for a week, a weekend, or longer.

Link to other foster parents. Build friendships with other foster parents from your agency and get involved with the children placed in their homes. You can

demonstrate the type of positive experience your agency could expect to have if they would place a child with you.

Talk to your worker. If, after several months and honest soul searching you have not yet had a child placed in your home, ask your licensing worker to meet with you to discuss the reasons why you have not had a placement.

Maybe you are trying to fill a fostering parent niche that your agency does not need filled (e.g., infants of a specific race or gender who have not been exposed to drugs or alcohol). Maybe your agency believes your talents lie elsewhere.

Ask and be willing to hear what the worker has to say. Perhaps you should work with a different foster care agency. Perhaps you should volunteer to work with children in another capacity. Big Brothers, Big Sisters, the Guardian ad Litem program, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts are all looking for volunteers. Your MAPP training would be seen as an asset by these organizations.

NC's Foster Care Infrastructure

North Carolina has developed a foster care infrastructure that currently includes:

- **100 public child-placing agencies** (county departments of social services). Every child in foster care in North Carolina is in the temporary custody of one of these public agencies, which are responsible for ensuring their safety and well-being. All of these agencies supervise traditional family foster homes; two (Catawba and Wake) also supervise therapeutic foster homes.
- **82 private child-placing agencies** licensed by the NC Division of Social Services. These agencies provide a variety of services; most contract with county DSS agencies to supervise traditional family foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, or both.
- **79 residential child care facilities** (group homes) licensed by the NC Division of Social Services. These placements are more often used for adolescents and children with serious mental or physical health difficulties.

Foster Homes

Parents in traditional **family foster homes** are trained to care for abused and neglected children while their parents work with social work professionals to resolve their family issues. Parents in **therapeutic foster homes** receive special training to provide care for children with serious emotional and behavioral problems. As of February 26, 2007 North Carolina had 6,391 licensed foster homes. Of these:

- 4,124 were family foster homes. Of these 76% (3,134) were supervised by DSS agencies and 24% (990) were supervised by private agencies.
- 2,267 were therapeutic foster homes. Of these 2% (45) were supervised by DSS agencies and 98% (2,222) were supervised by private agencies.

Because foster homes are such an essential part of our efforts—foster care could not exist without them—and because they can have such a direct effect upon the well-being of children, we should also have some sense of how the system uses foster homes and how long foster homes remain active.

Use. Gibbs (2005) examined administrative data on use of foster homes in Oregon, Oklahoma, and New Mexico.



As of February 26, 2007 there were 6,391 licensed foster homes in North Carolina.

Although she cautions that her findings are not necessarily generalizable to other states, she found that in these states just 20% of foster parents provided 60% to 72% of all foster care days. This is in line with the conclusion reached by Stukes Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004), who found that on a national level 33% of licensed homes have no children placed in their homes at any given time.

Length of Service. In the three states she studied Gibbs found that between 47% and 62% of foster parents quit fostering within one year of the first placement in their home, and that at least 20% of all foster homes left the system each year.

We do not have data about the length of service for foster homes in North Carolina. However, we do know that a large number of new foster homes are licensed each year. For example, in SFY 05-06 North Carolina licensed 1,790 new foster homes (NCDSS, 2007d).



NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

Visit the Association's Web Site at <www.ncfapa.org>

From the association's president by Stacey Darbee



Stacey Darbee

Happy Spring! The NCFAPA has been so busy the past several months that I almost don't know where to begin!

An Amazing Conference

Our 9th annual training conference, *Honoring Connections: The Key to Hidden Treasures*, was held April 20-22 and was a resounding success. Over 500 foster, adoptive, and kinship parents joined together for a weekend of learning, sharing, resting, games, and some dancing fun!

One highlight of this event was that we partnered with the Division, Duke University, and Appalachian Family Innovations to offer special training for therapeutic foster parents.

We also brought judges to the conference to give all participants a better understanding of our state's court system and the legal issues that affect them and the children in their homes. We believe that parents who are informed on all issues can make the best decisions for their families.

Undie Sunday

Every Sunday in May we are asking foster and adoptive parents to support children in care by spearheading an "Undie Sunday" collection in their community. As part of this, they will ask people to donate NEW underwear and socks to be distributed to foster and adoptive parents and local agencies. For more information go to our website, or you can send e-mail to office@ncfapa.org.

Positive Press

The NCFAPA is pleased to participate in some positive media exposure of fostering and adoption. Capital Broadcasting Co. will be producing a television show about disproportionality of children in care. Prior to the show its radio stations will air spots supportive of fostering and adoption. Tune in and let Capital Broadcasting know we appreciate their effort to shine a light on what we do!

The NCFAPA and the CFSR

The NC Division of Social Services continues to demonstrate its commitment to partnering with foster and adoptive parents by inviting the NCFAPA to weigh in on issues vital to child and family well-being. A prime example of this is North Carolina's 2007 federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR). During the CFSR, which occurs every five years or so, representatives of the Administration for Children and Families assess where each state's child welfare system is strong and where it needs improvement. This year the NCFAPA gave foster and adoptive parents a voice in this process by participating in the CFSR as an official stakeholder. Also, I represented the NCFAPA (and all the families we represent), by working with a federal reviewer to examine and analyze cases in the CFSR's on-site review in Catawba County. Being so involved in this process is a big step forward and gives us a new vision of what the partnership between the state and the NCFAPA can be.

New Tool to Enhance Social Worker Visits

If you haven't heard yet, a new tool is being piloted with several foster care agencies across North Carolina. This tool, the "Monthly Foster Care Contact Record," was developed by an advisory group of experts from across North Carolina that included representatives from the NCFAPA. This tool is designed for foster care workers to use once a month during visits with children in care and their foster families. The goal for the tool is to enhance the quality of visits by encouraging consistent exploration, support, and follow-up on the needs identified by children and foster families.

Between now and the end of the year this tool will be pilot tested in a number of North Carolina foster care agencies. The goal of the pilot is to improve the tool and its usefulness for workers and families. The NCFAPA is excited about this new tool because we believe it will be really beneficial to foster parents and the children in their care. If you have any feedback after you encounter this tool please let us know via our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

There are many other issues we are looking at including several legislative items. Please read more about it at our website <www.ncfapa.org>. Have a great summer!

Join the Association!

Membership is open to anyone interested in strengthening foster and adoptive services in North Carolina. Send this form, with payment (DO NOT send cash), to: NCFAPA at UNCG, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170. Make checks payable to the NC FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT ASSOCIATION.

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Helping your birth and other children get along by Mellicent Blythe

Little research has been done on interactions between birth children and children placed in foster care. Yet as any foster parent will attest, smoothly integrating children in foster care into a family's life is crucial for the well-being of everyone in the home.

It is also crucial for retaining foster parents. If conflict develops among children in a home, it could easily tip the scales for overwhelmed foster parents. Not only is the placement more likely to fail, but the family could potentially be lost as a safe haven for future children (Rhodes, et al. 2003).

One study, however, has just been published which considers the interactions of birth children, foster parents, and children in care (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007). The findings offer interesting considerations for foster parents striving to create a supportive and cohesive family for all the children in their home. Here is some of what the study found and possible implications:

- Kids in care and birth children had the same overall levels of self-worth and perceived the same amount of support from foster parents, each other, and their friends. This suggests many foster parents are already doing a good job creating an equitable atmosphere of support both within and outside of the family.
- Children in care described their foster parents as an important source of support, which confirms what other studies have found—that many children in care have positive views of their foster parents and of their placements.

- The support children in care received from their foster parents had a significant impact on their self-esteem. Taken together, these findings might offer some reinforcement for foster parents who may not hear thanks or acknowledgment of the help they've provided directly from children in their care.
- The level of support provided by foster fathers had the strongest influence on the child's self-esteem. The authors suggest this may be because the majority of children in care came from single-mother families, and the foster father may be the first father figure they've had. Another study (Gilligan, 2000) found that foster fathers are more often the ones to provide access to hobbies and outside activities, which can boost a child's sense of self-worth and confidence.
- Interestingly, the level of support that birth children received from their parents did not influence their self-esteem. The authors say this might be because birth children on some level expect to receive support from their parents. For many children in care, however, it is a new and unexpected experience to have a supportive parental figure.
- As for relationships between the two groups of children, they received more support from each other when they were the same age. If they were of different ages, the younger child received more support from the older child, regardless of which was birth and which was in foster care.

- Children in care in this study showed more withdrawal, aggression, and delinquent behavior than the birth children. This is probably not surprising, considering the maltreatment they have experienced. It certainly reinforces the challenges faced by foster parents who want to welcome children into their family, but also prevent their birth children from adopting the behaviors of a potential peer or role-model.

- Children in foster care and foster parents reported having more conflict with each other than did parents and birth children. The level of this conflict was directly related both to the child in care's feeling of self-worth and to his or her level of behavioral problems. In other words, the less they fought with the foster parents, the better their behavior and the better they felt about themselves and their abilities. This reinforces the importance of outside support to help foster families manage problematic behaviors and reduce conflict.



Mellicent Blythe is an Educational Specialist with the Jordan Institute for Families at the UNC Chapel Hill School of Social Work.



Reading this and that A Review of Foster Care and Adoption-Related Books, by Becky Burmester

I've been reading. No surprise there! But, what I've been reading is not the usual stuff.

My husband and I are long-time foster parents (over 22 years), but relative newcomers as adoptive parents (3 years). We never planned to adopt, but along the way two wonderful youngsters spent more than a year in our home and became ours to love forever. These great kids are African-American with forever parents who are Caucasian. Additionally Joe and I felt called to care for teens who are pregnant and/or parenting. Our parenting skills required updating to allow us to better meet the needs of the children sharing our home (permanently or temporarily).

If you foster teens, I think you'll find *Do You Have What It Takes? A Comprehensive Guide to Success After Foster Care* a must read. Published by Youth Communications,

this book is dedicated to the 25,000 young adults who age out of care annually. It is a multi-level book designed for use by individual teens, groups of teens, individual adults working with teens, and groups of adults working with teens. Each chapter has an activity page for group leaders and a worksheet for teens. The "been there, done that" articles in each chapter were written by young people who have been in foster care. As foster parents to youngsters who have since aged out, we recognized many of the difficulties our kids struggle with still. But, as parents (birth, foster, or adoptive) our talk about these issues was as effective as spitting into a strong wind.

If you work with teens and don't wish to purchase this book, ask your public library to add it to the collection. Every LINKS coordinator should own a copy of this book, as should every social worker working with in-

dependent living skills. The purchase price of *Do You Have What It Takes?* is an impressive \$35. The price is justified, however. There is no filler in this volume. Every article and work sheet educates the reader.

I will be lucky enough to attend the upcoming National Foster Parent Association annual conference. I expect to return with many more resources to recommend to you.

If you have a resource you'd highly recommend, please contact me (919/870-9968, becky.burmester@mindspring.com).

And remember, keep reading!

There's More Online! To read Becky's review of *Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections*, which she highly recommends, go to the online version of this issue at www.fosteringperspectives.org.

Finding that silver lining

Drug addiction. Helplessness. Being hurt by people you count on. Being separated from your family and friends. Feeling lost, unwanted, confused . . . Kids in foster care can speak with authority about some pretty bad things.



Indeed, as professionals and foster parents it is sometimes hard for us to understand how the children we care for can survive and overcome the challenges they face.

Yet it's clear that many do. This fact is powerfully demonstrated by the responses we received to the newsletter's latest writing contest, which asked children and youth who are or have been in foster care to tell us about something that seemed bad at the time but turned out to be a good thing.

As you can see from the essays published here and in the online edition of this issue (www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp_v11n2/kids_pages.htm), kids have an amazing capacity to extract insight from crisis, strength from struggle, and hope from stark uncertainty. That's something we must all keep in mind, especially when the going gets tough.

—John McMahon, Editor

Samantha, age 15

When I entered into foster care, I had a very bad attitude. I hated life and I just wanted to die because I seemed lost in this world. I felt that no one cared about me and that everyone was against me.

As I started high school, I changed my whole life around. I told myself that there are things worth living for. So I made new friends, I am on the "A" honor roll, and I feel thankful.

Now that I am in foster care, I've realized that all those people that I thought were against me were only trying to help me through my life. I now think foster care is the best thing that ever happened to me. I have a wonderful foster parent that cares about me a lot more than any person ever has. I also see my mistakes that I've made in the past. Now I wake up every morning thinking of what I can do to change the feelings that are still with me from my past. I tell myself that everything will be OK and today will be a good day. . . .

To the people who are reading this, always give something a try before giving up, because the harder you try the easier things get. Just give all of your hard work and it will pay off.

Samantha received \$15 for having her letter published.

"K," age 15

One thing that seemed bad to me was when my mommy went on drugs. To me it seemed as if she would never give it up. She would be gone days, weeks, and sometimes months without anyone having seen or heard from her. She would steal our stuff and sell it just to get more money to buy drugs. Almost every check she received was spent on drugs.

We would have very little food and our utilities would be cut off. We would be in the cold house for days, sometimes weeks. We would go to our neighbor's house asking for food. We would steal from the supermarkets.

Finally mommy got tired of it. I had to live with my paternal grandmother and my sisters went to their grandparents' home. I didn't know where my mother was. While I was at my grandmother's house I was abused. My . . . grandmother kept me out of school for two years. The abuse continued throughout the two years. When my aunt found out, she went to the school and reported it. One of my old teachers notified DSS . . . My sisters and I were placed in foster care. My sister was quickly reunified with her birth dad. I've been in the foster care system for the past four years. I've lived in a group home and two foster homes.

My mother was constantly getting in trouble . . . When she first went to jail, I felt responsible. I had spent a great deal of time trying to convince her to stop doing drugs. I thought because I was her daughter I could make her stop. I thought me and my sisters were the reason why my mom got on drugs.

My daddy has been in jail since 2002. He is expected to be released in 2008. I hope he gets out and does what he is supposed to do. I felt very sad and depressed, lonely and scared because I didn't know what was going to happen to me and my family. Everybody was separated from each other.

If you ask me now, I think it was a good thing for my mother to go to jail because that way her system would be clean. . . . I think she needed time to actually sit down and think about what happened to her family. I mean I actually thought she was going to die trying to get drugs. . . .

My mother has completed two recovery programs and has been clean for 90 days. She has made up her mind to participate in a two-year program because she knows that she needs more time in a safe environment.

I didn't like being in foster care. Sometimes I still don't like it, but I am grateful for foster care and the people in my life. My sisters are doing well . . . all of us stay in contact with one another. . . .

I have said all of this just to say that this situation has made me strong. My situation could have been much worse. I thank God for keeping me. Now I am in school working hard on my grades. I am on the step team. I decided to be a positive person in spite of my situation. I feel like I have made it through the rough times and hard times. I think if I have made it this far, I could keep going. One day I hope and pray that my family will reunite. That's my story—something that started out bad but ended up good.

K's letter won first prize, for which she was awarded \$100.

If I have
made it this
far, I can
keep going.



Katie, age 14

2

When I heard the news about entering foster care I was scared and nervous because I was coming into a home of strangers and getting to know their rules. I felt so many feelings but the most outrageous feeling I felt was that I felt like I was going to be harmed.

But it turned out to be that I am safe, loved, and supported by my foster family. They are the F's. We have gotten to know each other and I have talked to them about getting adopted by them. And I have waited patiently on their answer and they said yes, just not right away. But at first I didn't think it would work because of my age. But we talked to who we needed to talk to about it and it worked. When you find out that you're put up for adoption or won't get adopted it might seem scary or upsetting but it's really not that bad, cause you will still be able to have fun and be a kid or a teenager.

When I found out I could get adopted I was worried about my real family but the F's and my caseworker said I could still have visits with them.

Being adopted is a wonderful thing because you have this family wanting to bring you in their home and get to know you and they want to love, support, and give you what you need. They want to be the mother, father—and sometimes brothers, sisters—that you've never had. It's not that hard to give someone a chance that is willing to be there for you. I hope all the kids in foster care that want to be adopted make the right choice.

Katie's letter won second prize, for which she was awarded \$50.

Donna, age 17

3

I became a foster child at age 15. I turned myself in to DSS custody. At my foster home I hated it at first. I thought they (my foster family) was being so mean by not letting me go out and do what I wanted to do. I was so sure I wanted to leave their house, but I didn't want to go to a group home. That was really the only other choice I had. So I decided to stay there and suffer.

Well, as time passed by all that "discipline" and hard love really paid off. It made me a stronger and better person. It took a while, but I grew to love the H family. At one point I wanted them to adopt me. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. I went back to live with my mom in October 2006.

I am now so thankful for all the trouble we went through at "the H's House." Most of all, I am glad the H's didn't ever give up on me. And even though I'm not a foster child anymore, I still go to spend weekends with the H's.

Donna's letter won third prize, for which she was awarded \$25.

Joy, age 12

... My mother's been telling me for seven years [she would get us back and we would be happy again] and it hasn't happened yet. ... Now I realize that my brothers and me aren't going back home with our mother again. It will just be for visits unless she loses her rights.

But I'm in this good foster home . . . and they treat me well and they made me have confidence in myself and I feel smart and sometimes prettier.

What do **you** think? Am I blessed or not? If **you** were in foster care from the time **you** were 5 years old till **you're** almost 13 years old and **your** mother and father and grandparents keep telling you they will get you back? Would **you** begin to feel sad and wonder whether or not **your** parents will accept the fact that you're not coming home and you don't believe it anymore?

But now I'm in a good foster home . . . and now my aunt is trying to get me and I am happy. And my cousins go to the same school and we're both happy. I guess bad things can turn good.

Joy received \$15 for having her letter published.

What do you think? Am I blessed or not?

Star, age 12

I got taken away from my biological parents when I was four years old.

I was really scared. I didn't know who my foster parents would be. All I knew was their names. When I did get used to my foster family I still cried a lot because I missed my family and friends. Then the foster family decided it was time for me to go to a different family.

I went through five foster families before I got to the one I'm with now. They welcomed me into their home and gave me a place to stay. I wanted this to be my home from now on. I tried my best to act like I was taught to by all the other foster families. I didn't want to keep going to different foster families and no one wanting me.

The reason no one else wanted me was because I acted up a lot. I thought that if I acted up a lot I would be able to go to my biological family. But they didn't know how to care for me or teach me anything. So when I first got taken away from my biological family and put into a foster home I thought it was bad at the moment but in the end it turned out to be good.

I am now adopted by the last family I mentioned. And now I know that my life before I came here wasn't anything compared to my life now. And what used to be bad turned out very good. Actually, it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me . . . now I have a family I can call my own and that care about and love me very much.

Star received \$15 for having her letter published.

Alissa, age 9

When I found out that I was not going back to live with my birth mother, I felt sad. I found out at the same time that I was going to be adopted by a new family. I felt sad about that, too, because I didn't want to move. . . . I was really scared. When I first met my adoptive mom and dad, I kind of felt happy because they looked like they were nice. As it turns out, I had a fun time and now I am part of their family.

Alissa received \$15 for having her letter published.

Child welfare worker visits with children in foster care

When children enter foster care in North Carolina they are placed temporarily in the custody of their county department of social services (DSS). From the moment children enter care until they return home or go to another permanent placement, DSS agencies are responsible for ensuring these children are safe and receive the support and nurturing they need to heal, grow, and thrive.

Evidence suggests that regular, high-quality visits with the child in his or her foster home are a great way for agencies to ensure they are living up to this responsibility. This article will describe some of what we know about this subject and discuss steps being taken on the federal and state levels to enhance visits between child welfare workers and children in care.

An Invaluable Tool

During the first round of federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR), reviewers found a positive relationship between child welfare worker visits with children and most of the outcomes being measured, including:

- Achieving reunification, guardianship, and permanent placement with relatives
- Preserving children's connections while in foster care, including their relationships with their parents
- Assessing needs and providing services to children and families
- Involving children and parents in case planning
- Meeting the educational, physical health, and mental health needs of children

(NRCFCPPP, 2006)

The reviews also identified concerns regarding worker visits, including an inconsistent focus during visits on issues regarding case plans and goals and insufficient face-to-face contacts with children or parents to address their safety and well-being (NCSL, 2006).

New Federal Law

There is a new federal law that seeks to turn this knowledge into enhanced child welfare practice with families.

In fall 2006, Congress passed the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (Public Law 109-288). Part of this legislation provides additional funding to support monthly caseworker visits to children in foster care. Along with this funding comes a mandate: by October 1, 2007, states must describe in their state plan standards for the content and frequency of worker visits with kids in care. In addition, PL 109-288 sets forth the expectation that by October 1, 2011, all states must be able to prove that 90% of all children in foster care are receiving monthly face-to-face visits with their child welfare workers, and that a majority of these visits are taking place in the residence of the child (e.g., in the foster home).

Beginning October 2007, states must prove they are making progress to meeting the 90% standard. Beginning October 2008, if a state falls short of this standard it faces possible financial penalties.

Visits in NC

North Carolina's policy requires child welfare agencies to have at least monthly face-to-face contact with children in foster care. It also requires agencies to have monthly contact with placement providers about the child's needs and progress, though at present contact with providers need not be face-to-face.

Our state began seeking to enhance visits between social workers and children in care even before the passage of PL 109-288. Its interest was driven in part by its desire to improve the stability of foster placements. In 2003, only 52.3% of NC children who had been in care 12 months or less had experienced two or fewer placements. This level of performance was well below the national median of 84.2% (USDHHS, 2006).

What Do You Think?

If you are a foster parent in North Carolina, we'd like to hear what you think about social worker visits with children in foster care. If you have observations or a story to tell on this topic, please share them with us. E-mail your submissions to johnmcmahon@mindspring.com or send them via U.S. mail to the address on page 2.



A Pilot Project

To address placement instability and other issues, in spring 2006 the NC Division of Social Services contracted with the Jordan Institute for Families at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work to help develop a tool for practitioners to use during visits with children in foster care. The long-term vision for this tool, whose working title is the "Monthly Foster Care Contact Record," is that it will be used by all public and private child welfare agencies in the state to (1) enhance the safety and well-being of children in foster care; (2) make agency visits with children and foster families more productive and consistent; (3) encourage honest, supportive relationships between foster parents and agencies; and (4) make North Carolina's child welfare documentation more consistent and streamlined.

Working with an advisory group comprised of representatives from public and private child-placing agencies, foster parents, and other stakeholders, the Division has developed a draft of this tool. This version, which contains more than a dozen items, encourages workers to ask about changes in household membership, safety and supervision practices used in home, and other issues during each face-to-face visit with children in care and their foster families.

To refine this tool and ensure it complements effective practices already in use, the Division will pilot test it in at least 24 agencies (see box) between May and October 2007. Foster parent participation is an essential component of this pilot, and the Division will be working closely with the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association to obtain foster parent feedback about the tool's content and effectiveness.

If the pilot goes as planned, the Division anticipates that this tool could be available for use statewide sometime in 2008.

Pilot Agencies

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Alexander Youth Network | 10. Davie County DSS | 20. Rutherford County DSS |
| 2. Alliance Human Services | 11. Easter Seals UCP NC* | 21. Tipton Therapeutic Foster Care Homes |
| 3. Boys and Girls Homes of NC | 12. Eliada* | 22. Vance County DSS |
| 4. Cabarrus County DSS | 13. Guilford County DSS | 23. Wilson County DSS |
| 5. Caring for Children | 14. Harnett County DSS* | 24. Youth Focus |
| 6. Carteret County DSS | 15. Henderson County DSS | * Agencies with an asterisk |
| 7. Children's Home Society* | 16. Iredell County DSS* | begin piloting the tool in May. |
| 8. Cleveland County DSS* | 17. Moore County DSS | All others begin in July. |
| 9. Community Services for Children (Grandfather Home) | 18. Nazareth Children's Home* | |
| | 19. New Hanover County DSS* | |

Children do best in families

by Jeanne Preisler

It was twelve years ago. Spring was trying its best to push winter aside. The temperature outside was nearly perfect – not too hot, not too cold. The sun was very bright, but unfortunately, my mood was not. My heart pounded in my chest as I walked from my car to the building. I remember stepping into the open room, unsure of what to expect. The group home cottage had eight beds, four on each side. Each girl had decorated her space to reflect her own style. Collectively it added up to visual chaos. The energy of the room picked up as I entered. I was a visitor. The noise increased as many girls asked questions and wanted to show me around. But my focus was on the teenage girl I had come to see.

Maya was 14 when she entered foster care. The reasons are too ghastly to share here. As a friend of my niece who lived with me, I had met her on a few occasions prior to this day. She had spent the night at my house once or twice. Today, my niece and I were visiting her at the group home where she had been placed. She wanted to come live with us. She asked if I would become a foster parent. I was 26 years old, single, scared, and unsure of what to do. At least, I was unsure until I walked into the room on that spring morning.

The two teenage girls that I eventually took into my home will themselves be 26 years old this year. It is strange to think about (for them and for me). But that day at the group home will forever be etched in my heart. We often hear “children do best in families” and I can feel the truth in these words. It is not easy to explain, however, why they do best in families. I asked Maya to reflect on her experience in the group home. This is what she had to say:

Children who have experienced situations traumatic enough to necessitate such care exist in survival mentality; in large groups, this manifests as an animalistic, mob-rule system. Children begin to search for emotional support within gang and pack-like structures led by the strongest and most intimidating child present. Any unsupervised moment becomes an opportunity for the pack to torment the newest and weakest member of the group. This teasing and emotional torture is designed to demean and depress the victim.

If successful, the leaders can further torment the weakest member by reporting emotional disturbances to the staff, thus resulting in restrictions, punishments and in some cases, more berating and teasing. Because gang leaders are often the most senior residents, they are often the first to present their ‘concern’ for their fellow housemate’s behavior and well-being to the staff. These abused children have no trusted adults to turn to. What this creates is a private hell-like prison inside the supposed sanctuary.

My daughter was in one of the 79 group homes in North Carolina. Approximately 16% of all children who enter the world of foster care will be placed in a group home. Although that percentage has decreased from the low 20s in recent years, we still have close to 1,000 kids in group homes in NC today. Anything that is not a family setting is considered a group home. It could be a residential school or an emergency shelter. It could be large or small; it could provide mental health treatment to a child or just the standard supervision.

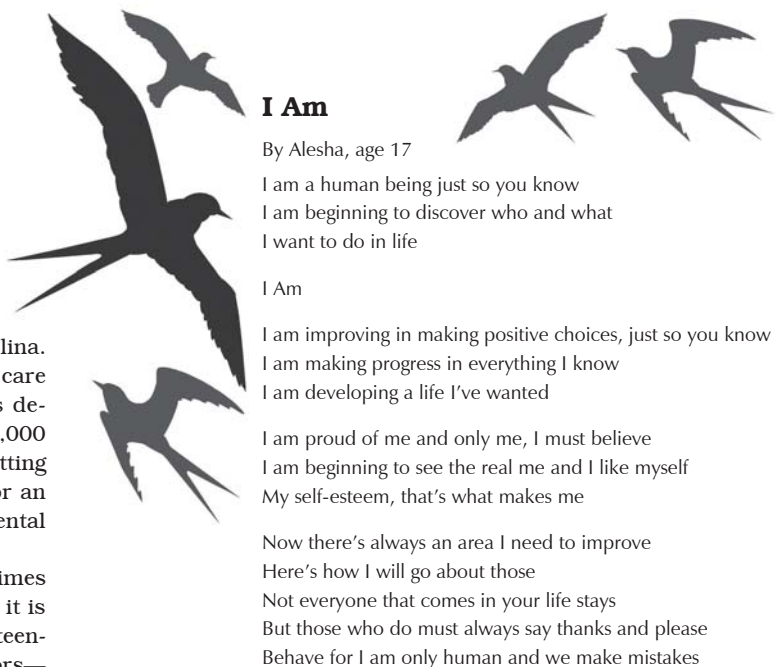
Why are so many of our youth placed in group homes? Sometimes it is appropriate for emergency, safety, or treatment needs, but it is often because we cannot find foster families willing to work with teenagers. Families are scared of a young person’s potential behaviors—running away, stealing, breaking things, etc. I know because I was

also scared. But do we really want fear to win out over doing what is right? Children are suffering because adults are scared.

There is a teenager right now, in a group home, lying in a bed without much privacy, wondering how it is possible that his social worker cannot find *one* foster family to take him in. He is trying to finish high school, trying to stay out of trouble, and trying to find his way among peer pressure. Why is it so hard to open our doors to this child? How many of you reading this have an open bed? What is stopping you from calling your social worker and letting him or her know that you are willing to open your home to teenagers? Is it fear?

Equally as important as shedding our fears, we need to be advocates for these children. If everyone reading this, and everyone in the foster care and adoption community, committed to telling ten people every month about the need for more foster/adoptive parents for teenagers, we might be able to make a difference in North Carolina. “You don’t have to be perfect to be the perfect parent” is the Ad Council’s national theme for foster care/adoption recruitment. It is true! Those of us who have done it can attest to that. (My girls would certainly attest to that too!) It is our responsibility to recruit more parents. Go out there and tell ten people this month there is a teenager in need. Give them your agency’s telephone number or NC Kids Adoption & Foster Care Network’s telephone number (1-877-NCKIDS-1). We won’t be asking you or them to go it alone. There are support agencies out there, such as the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association and the Family Support Network of North Carolina, that can help them on their journey.

Opening my home to two teenagers was the hardest thing I have ever done, but it was also the best. They bring me such joy and have made me so proud to be their mom. They are both in college, doing incredibly well, and have wonderful plans for the future. If a single 26 year old girl can do it, you can definitely do it too! Let’s give more young people an opportunity to “do best in families” by opening our doors and recruiting more families to open theirs.



I Am

By Alesha, age 17

I am a human being just so you know
I am beginning to discover who and what
I want to do in life

I Am

I am improving in making positive choices, just so you know
I am making progress in everything I know
I am developing a life I’ve wanted

I am proud of me and only me, I must believe
I am beginning to see the real me and I like myself
My self-esteem, that’s what makes me

Now there’s always an area I need to improve
Here’s how I will go about those
Not everyone that comes in your life stays
But those who do must always say thanks and please
Behave for I am only human and we make mistakes

New video extends a heart to foster youths by Nancy Carter

Just when you think you've seen everything from SaySo, a video is produced AND it's available to view for free on the group's website (www.saysoinc.org).

The video, "For You," provides heartfelt messages for youths in foster care. Six older youths (ages 15-23) are featured in the video, which is divided into sections that can be viewed separately or in chronological order. Sections include: LINKS, Support, Legal Issues, Health/Sexuality, and SaySo. The video was produced with financial support from the Fenwick Foundation.

SaySo created this video to reach the thousands of youths in foster care around North Carolina who may never get a chance to participate in SaySo events or even meet other teens in foster care. The content was determined by the SaySo Board of Directors (foster teens), with priority given to those issues that can be confusing or rarely discussed with social workers or foster parents. The video introduces a few of those issues to support youths in their growth through foster care.

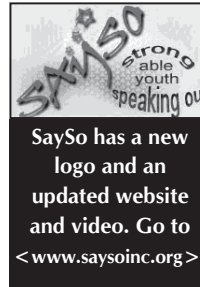
A "For You" guidebook will be produced next year and made available on the website. It will contain a complete listing of resources, poli-

cies, advocacy ideas, suggestions, and responsibilities of older youths involved with the foster care system. It is SaySo's hope that the video and guidebook will answer many questions and provide youths with the support to set goals, learn decision-making, and practice advocacy skills as active participants in their future.

Although the intended audience is foster youths, adults will find the material helpful for training, education, and recruiting foster and adoptive families. To purchase "For You" on CD, e-mail sayso@ilrinc.com or send a check for \$10 (includes shipping/handling) to SaySo, Inc., 411 Andrews Road, Durham, NC 27705.

On the Road to a Decade

We have started planning a year of celebrations as SaySo approaches its tenth anniversary. "On the Road to a Decade" began with an annual conference and ninth birthday party on March 3 in Jamestown. This kickoff commenced with the debut of the



"For You" video, a newly designed website, and logo. At the close of the full day conference complete with regional meetings, workshops on advocacy, support, finances, building local chapters, and understanding the legal language, youths elected 17 members to the 2007-08 Board of Directors.

Seeking Regional Assistants

SaySo will soon employ young adults (18 – 26 years old) who are or have been in substitute care. These "Regional Assistants" will be hired to work part-time promoting SaySo events, connecting with members and aged-out youths, helping establish chapters, attending conferences, coordinating events, and assisting with a range of statewide agencies requesting SaySo involvement. This position could provide supplemental income for people who have finished high school and are able to meet with youths in their region. To learn more visit the SaySo website or e-mail sayso@ilrinc.com. SaySo began hiring in April and will continue until all six positions are filled.

Nancy is the Executive Director of Strong Able Youth Speaking Out.

What parents should remember about trauma by Elizabeth Cassedy

It has been more than a year since I left my position as a foster home licensing worker with a North Carolina county department of social services. Since then I have been busy with my kids. I keep saying that I've learned more from parenting them than from all the schools I have attended or in my many "working" years.

One of the most important lessons that I have learned—and keep learning—is that trauma doesn't disappear from your children's lives as much as you would like. You can have the greatest therapist and you can be years into your adoption, but if you are parenting a child who has experienced trauma in the past, it will continue to rear its ugly head. This will happen during times of transition, changing grades, starting high school, leaving middle school, friends leaving, whatever. It will happen especially when you are feeling complacent, when you're thinking, "Hey, this isn't so bad. We're doing a great job."

It's important that you recognize what is happening. If your child has PTSD, he or she might give you random signals that flashbacks are recurring. If your child hasn't mentioned a particular person/situation for the past two years and then starts bringing the event up in everyday conversation, pay attention. The typical high schooler will have episodes of forgetting school work. If your child has always been diligent about grades and you see some major slipping, it's time to evaluate what is going on.

What do you do when reactions to trauma come back into your children's lives? You need to recognize the situation for what it is and then take action: talk to your therapist, make sure you are connected to your kid, keep talking, keep working on it. There is no magic fix. Work on teaching your kids to deal with the way their past can sometimes affect them. They need to learn the coping skills, they need to recognize that

this can sweep them away. They need to deal with it.

When reactions to trauma come back into my children's lives I remind myself of five magic words: "This is not about me."

I call this my mantra. It is especially helpful to say this mantra to yourself when you are blindsided by your teenager's disproportionate response to something mundane—for example, an innocent question about his or her homework. Oh, and another thing. When your kids are speaking or acting out of a reaction to long-ago trauma, always wait a few critical moments before you speak.

I have learned that trauma's influence can mean that you must go back and parent your children as though they are the age when they were most affected by the trauma—for example, at times you might need to parent your 15-year-old as though he or she is an 8-year-old. You find that you must check homework as you

would for an 8-year-old, look at assignments and make sure that they are written down, and use daily reminders about turning work in. These are the kinds of things you would typically do for your third grader, but your kid is in high school.

Trauma also can affect how your child learns. You may not discover this for years, as kids are skilled at making do, especially if they had to pretend that everything was OK when they were younger. The effects of trauma upon a child's ability to learn can be remediated to some level, but they will always affect how your child learns. This is another life skill you have to teach—your kid needs to know how they learn and why, not as an excuse but so they will understand what they need to do to succeed in school and in life.

Elizabeth Cassedy is an adoptive parent and a former foster home licensing social worker.



The educational needs of kids in foster care

"As a group, foster kids test far behind their peers, are more likely to drop out, repeat grades, be in special-ed classes, and be suspended or expelled." —Paulson, 2005

The first thing you should know about the educational needs of children involved with the child welfare system, especially those in foster care, is that they often struggle in school. Common areas of difficulty and concern include the following.

Poor academic performance. In general, children and youth in foster care get lower grades and score lower on standardized tests than their peers (Christian, 2004). For example, Blome (1997) found that most youth in foster care receive "C" grades, compared to control groups, which receive a mix of "B" and "C" grades. In another study, youth in foster care who had completed the 10th or 11th grades were reading, on average, at only a seventh grade level (Courtney, et al., 2004).

Inappropriate special education services and placement. Children involved with the child welfare system may be at risk either for being underserved or overserved by special education programs. Some who need special education services are overlooked. Others, because of temporary behavioral problems caused by placement disruptions or entry into care, receive special education services even though they don't really need them (McNaught, 2005; Courtney et al., 2004).

At least 30% to 41% of children and youth in care receive special education services (Yu, 2003). Once they enter special education classes, children in foster care seldom return to the regular classroom. One study found that only 2% of children in out-of-home care in special education classes ever return to the regular classroom, compared to 10% of children not in foster care (Carter, 2002).

Behavior problems in school may indicate that a child is disengaged from academics (Alex-

ander et al., 2001). Kids in care have more school behavior problems and are much more likely to be classified as behaviorally disturbed than other children, more so even than other children involved with child protective services (Smithgall et al., 2005).

High rates of suspensions and expulsions. Compared to their non-foster care peers, children and youth in foster care are suspended, expelled, and subject to other school disciplinary actions at very high rates. Smithgall and colleagues (2005) found that nearly 70% of children in foster care in Chicago had been suspended; 18% had been expelled.

Repeating grades. In her review of the research literature, Yu (2003) found that 26% to 40% of youth in care repeat one or more grades.

One study found that students in foster care who are NOT identified as educationally at risk are actually the most likely to be held back (Rosenfeld & Richman, 2004). This supports the idea that although children with serious problems are likely to get help, children struggling at a marginal level often fail to get the support they need (CASCW, 2000).

Lower graduation rates. Most studies have found that children in foster care graduate from high school at a rate at least 10 percentage points below the gradua-


Why School Matters

"Of all the difficulties foster children experience, low academic achievement may have the most serious consequences for their futures."

If you're a foster parent, you may be surprised by this statement. If you've seen with your own eyes how powerfully some children are affected by abuse and neglect, you may even be tempted to dismiss this statement as just plain wrong.

Yet before you jump to conclusions, consider the severe and far-reaching consequences academic failure can have for any child. For example, school failure has been linked to poverty in later life; early involvement in sexual intercourse and increased risk of STDs; higher health care costs, mortality rates, and incidence of suicide; more frequent admissions to state mental hospitals; and increased use of social services, including economic assistance.

School failure also hurts society as a whole by contributing to increased crime, reduced political participation, loss of national income and tax revenues, and general waste of human potential.



tion rate of comparison students (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). In Chicago's public schools, 32% of teens in foster care graduate, compared with 59% for their non-foster peers (Smithgall, et al. 2004).

Low rates of postsecondary education. Most youth in foster care have high educational aspirations. When researchers interviewed teens in care at age 17 and 18 as they prepared to leave the child welfare system, most said they hoped and expected to graduate from college eventually (Courtney, et al., 2004).

Few do. Although interviews with foster care "alumni" found that four in ten (42.7%) received some education beyond high school, only one in five (21.9%) alumni age 25 and older had com-

pleted a vocational degree. Alumni obtained a bachelor's or higher degree at a rate that was dramatically lower than that of the general population: 2.7% for alumni versus 24% for the general population (Pecora et al., 2005).

Consequences Researchers recently examined outcomes for 659 young adults who had been placed in family foster care as children. They found that 20% were unemployed, 33% lived at or below poverty rate, 33% had no health insurance, and 22% had been homeless for at least one night (Pecora et al., 2005).

It seems reasonable to assume that the kind of educational difficulties described above contribute in some way to these negative long-term outcomes.

How Foster Parents Can Support the Schooling of Kids in Care

by Beverley Smith, Director, NC Kids Adoption & Foster Care Network

Set Positive Expectations. If we expect children to perform poorly, they will often fulfill this expectation. Therefore, express positive expectations at all times.

Take an Active Interest. Attend parent-teacher conferences and other school-related functions or meetings. Monitor homework, classroom assignments, and behavior. Talk openly with the youth to help her identify roadblocks and educational needs. Encourage the youth to develop independent learning and self-advocacy.

Talk with Your Child's Teacher. Explain your role and limitations as a foster parent. Ask the teacher about his expectations of the youth. Discuss resources, needs, and any identified obstacles for the child.

Talk with Your Child's Social Worker. Clarify your role, responsibilities, and expectations related to the child's

education. Specifically, talk about school-related decisions such as enrollment and signing permission slips for field trips or sports and shared parenting techniques. Ultimately, the educational needs of children in care should be addressed collaboratively by all the adults involved in the child's life. This information should also be shared with the schools since schools are not always clear on who is responsible for the child in regards to these matters. Your child's foster care worker or your licensing worker can also let you know about any trainings or support groups related to education.

Be an Advocate. Educational advocates should develop relationships with school staff and other relevant partners. Be persistent but flexible. As an advocate, you should be committed to what is in the best interest of the child.

Our consumer society can make adoption a challenge by Beverley Smith

In today's society, the word adoption is used in many ways. You can adopt a highway, a law, a pet, and even a star in the sky. But do any of these require the same level of commitment as adopting a child?

The Consumer Mentality

In the U.S. today the act of adopting a child is sometimes unduly influenced by *consumerism*, which can be defined as the compulsive acquisition of goods or services for direct ownership.

Individuals with a **consumer mentality** have high expectations for their self-interests and are always seeking the product or service that will result in ultimate happiness. This mentality is an unconscious filter that often prevents people from assessing their true need for a purchase or the consequences of acquiring the service or product. Sadly, the realm of adoption is not immune to this way of thinking.

Influence on Adoption of Children

The adoption of a child creates or expands a family by transferring the rights and responsibilities of parenting from the birth parent/agency to a new set of parents. Adoption is a permanent, lifelong commitment, and the benefits of adoption are shared between the adoptive family and the adoptive child. The best interest and needs of the child have to be considered and met to make an adoption a success.

When considering adoption, families must conduct a great deal of self-analysis, which is guided by training and their adoption social worker. Agencies that facilitate adoptions look first and foremost for selflessness in prospective adoptive families.

Unfortunately, our consumer culture can skew an individual's expectations about children in foster care and the adoption process. Families sometimes believe (consciously or unconsciously) they deserve a perfect child because of the time, resources, and energy they put into the adoption process. This can be a recipe for disaster: inevitably, the real needs and best interests of the adopted child interfere with the personal gratification sought by the family. Unlike clothes or material goods, children cannot be returned when they fail to meet your personal needs or expectations.

Consumerism may be at work when individuals approach adoption as a means to give a birth child a sibling, to save their marriage, or to fill a void in their lives. Personal gratification may even be at work when people adopt with the seemingly altruistic goal of "saving a child." This intention will only lead to disappointment for a family if (or when) the child fails to show adequate appreciation for the sacrifices the parents have made.

Families need to realize that love is not enough to sustain an adoption. When families approach adoption with selfish motivations, the risk of disruption or dissolution increases.

The Commitment Mentality

To make adoption work, families must approach it with realism and a **commitment mentality**. Children in foster care tend to have more special needs than children in the general population. These needs won't disappear when a child is adopted.

A family's commitment to the adopted child must be unwavering. A family must have a firm resolve to raise a child no matter how difficult things become. Successful adoptive parents have the ability to delay the gratification of their own needs and instead focus on the needs of the child. Children in adoptive homes will test this commitment repeatedly. Fantasy children do not exist.

Unlike consumer products or goods, children cannot be returned when they fail to meet your needs or expectations.

Agencies should ensure that the expectations of prospective adoptive families are thoroughly assessed. Agencies should also assess their own recruitment methods to ensure they are not using strategies that promote a consumer mentality in prospective adoptive families.

Families don't have to be perfect to be the perfect family for a child. Experienced foster parents often make excellent adoptive parents because they know children in foster care, understand their needs, and are better able to see the children for what they are: imperfect, like the rest of us. They are also likely to see the adoption process for what it is: a priceless gift of ongoing commitment that families give to children—not a commercial exchange.

Conclusion

Families and child welfare agencies must pay attention to the way consumerism is impacting adoption within our society. Families cannot withdraw their commitment from a child in search for a "better" child. An interested family must ask themselves if adoption is the right choice for them and whether they are the right family to be adopting. A family should consider the life-style commitments needed and their personal motivations for wanting to adopt. Adoption should always be approached with a commitment mentality.

Beverley Smith is the Director of NC Kids Adoption & Foster Care Network (1-877-NCKIDS-1, www.adoptnckids.org). This article is adapted from: Del Pilar, R. T. "Undermining Successful Adoption: The Consumer's Point of View," 32nd Annual North American Council on Adoptable Children. Hyatt Convention Center. Long Beach, CA. 28 July 2006.

My Adoptive Parents Helped Me Get Over a Rough Start

Rebecca, age 14

I am adopted and have been in foster care since birth. Fourteen years ago, I didn't know what parents were for. All I knew was that you couldn't trust them or count on them. The reason is because I was abandoned. My adoptive mother says I went from nurse to nurse and that's why when she got me I couldn't look at her. But the real reason was because I was afraid to be loved.

This was a major crisis in my life because everybody needs to be loved. From the smallest child to the oldest adult, everybody needs a pat on the back, a hug, and most of all, an "I love you." But what I was suffering from was not something you could fix overnight. It took a lot of time and gentle loving care.

This is when the bad turned into the good. Even though my birth mother didn't want me, she gave me life so that someone who couldn't have kids could love and take care of me. As I began to realize this I came out of my shell. I began to let my adoptive mother hug me. I didn't have to wish I would just disappear. My adoptive family wanted me.

Just like it takes a long time for a flower to grow and blossom, it's exactly how love works. For you foster parents reading this, cheer up! Because eventually you'll get through the tough spots and those hurting children will start to love you, too!

Rebecca received \$15 for having her letter published.

I was suffering from something you could not fix overnight. It took a lot of time and gentle loving care.

Help us find families for these children



Alexis



Dustin



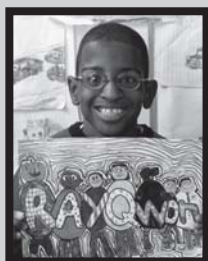
Brande



Lonnie



Dakota



RayQwon



Damien



Shanice



Dustin



Trena

Do you remember what it was like waiting for Christmas morning to arrive when you were a child? Imagine waiting for a forever family to find you! A day in the life of these waiting children can seem like an eternity. Help us NOW by bringing this page to your workplace and by showing it to your friends. You can make a difference that will last a lifetime!

Alexis (born 1/4/94)

Alexis is a calm, quiet girl who is somewhat shy until she gets to know you. Three words used to describe Alexis are polite, bright, and good natured. She enjoys fixing hair, reading, and listening to music. Alexis also likes to watch basketball and eat hamburgers. Alexis is a very bright child who works hard in her mainstream classes to earn good grades. Alexis is respectful to teachers and is learning ways to express her feelings when she is sad or upset. (NC #011-2304)

Brande (born 8/28/91)

Brande is a quiet girl with a humble spirit. She enjoys being with family and friends. She likes living in her current foster home because she gets to do lots of fun things. Brande likes to design clothes and has been known to take the scissors to her own clothing to change the style. It's no surprise that she hopes to be a fashion designer or beautician. Brande is also very good at drawing and writing poetry. Brande's individual education program seems to be working; she earns A's and B's. (NC #013-1096)

Dakota (born 11/10/98)

Dakota is a delightful child who thrives on love and attention. He is a typical little boy with typical little boy behaviors. Dakota is described as inquisitive, free-spirited, lovable, caring, and easy going. His naturally joyous and nurturing spirit extends to other children as well as adults. With the help of his mentor, Dakota continues to make great strides in all areas of his life, including academics. Dakota is a beautiful child who is eager to share and bring an abundance of love and excitement to someone's life. (NC #068-2678)

Damien (born 6/27/99)

Damien is an adorable little boy with a great sense of humor. He's very friendly. His foster mom says, "I love his smile and his beautiful eyes." Damien enjoys playing soccer, swimming, boating, playing outside, and Sunday school. Damien wants to be a magician when he grows up. He attends a specialized classroom where his teacher says his academic abilities have really blossomed. (NC #067-2645)

Dustin (born 7/28/94)

Dustin is a loving and energetic boy with bright blue eyes and a pleasantly expressive face. He is polite, friendly, and talkative. Dustin enjoys playing video games, kickball, baseball, and football, but he loves art projects. He says he wants to be a chef when he grows up. Dustin attends specialized classes at school where he has a personal aide for two hours a day. He is doing quite well in

school. Counseling helps Dustin address issues from his past and work on his self-esteem. (NC #023-2593)

Dustin (born 8/23/95)

Dustin is a great kid with a delightful personality. He enjoys running and playing outside, swimming, and fishing. He can be outgoing and friendly and likes to be helpful to his foster mom. Dustin is a very compassionate boy who doesn't like to hurt anyone's feelings. He attends regular classes at school where he can do the work and should be a little more challenged. (NC #064-2400)

Lonnie (born 10/26/95)

Lonnie is a talkative, sociable, and energetic young man. He enjoys watching movies, playing basketball and video games, and researching on the computer. Church has been a strong and positive influence on Lonnie. Lonnie attends special resource classes with shortened hours to help him maintain appropriate conduct. (NC #046-2708)

RayQwon (born 3/22/96)

RayQwon is an attractive, charming child who has a positive effect on everyone he meets. He loves drawing and creating animation on the computer and his art reveals great depth and detail. RayQwon attends mainstream classes at school. He is now able to hear and is making progress with a special implant. Using American Sign Language helps RayQwon communicate his needs and wants. (NC #049-821)

Shanice (born 1/13/93)

Shanice is happiest doing things she loves like playing baseball, reading, or writing. She is a talented artist and could succeed in an art or fashion career. Shanice is conscientious about her appearance and takes special care with her personal things. An Individualized Education Plan helps Shanice better understand what is expected of her and allows her to stay on task in class. (NC #043-1735)

Trena (born 10/16/91)

Trena is a vivacious and social teenager with blond hair and beautiful blue eyes. She generally has a pleasant attitude and can be quite sweet and caring. Trena has recently begun to show a strong artistic ability and is also proud of her growing gymnastics talent. Trena is a bright girl whose teachers speak highly of her and her potential. (NC #011-2703)



For more information on these children or adoption in general, call the NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network at 1-877-NCKIDS-1 <www.adoptnckids.org>

Writing Contest

If you are under 18 and are or have been in foster care, please send us a letter or short essay in response to the following:



FIRST PRIZE: \$100

SECOND PRIZE: \$50

THIRD PRIZE: \$25

Please tell us what you think about the monthly visits you have with your foster care social worker. How do they make you feel? What makes them helpful? What would make them better?

Deadline: August 10, 2007

E-mail your submission to johnmcmahon@mindspring.com or send it via U.S. Mail to: Fostering Perspectives, NC Division of Social Services, 1459 Sand Hill Rd., No. 6, Candler, NC 28715. Include your name, age, address, social security number (used to process awards only, confidentiality will be protected) and phone number. In addition to receiving the awards specified above, winners will have their work published in the next issue. Runners-up may also have their work published, for which they will also receive a cash award.

We're Also Seeking Artwork and Other Writing Submissions

Submissions can be on any theme. The submission requirements described above apply. If sent via U.S. Mail, artwork should be sent flat (unfolded) on white, unlined paper.

Get in-service training credit for reading this newsletter!

Enjoy reading *Fostering Perspectives* and earn credit toward your relicensure. Just write down the answers to the questions below and present them to your social worker. If your answers are satisfactory, you'll receive 30 minutes of credit toward your training requirement. Questions about this method of gaining in-service credit? Contact the NC Division of Social Services at 919/733-7672.

In-Service Quiz, FP v11#2

1. On average, how long do children stay in foster care in North Carolina?
2. What are the three primary theories that have been proposed to explain the disproportionate representation of minorities in the child welfare system? According to Robert Hill, which theory is correct?
3. Name four factors agencies consider when deciding whether to place a child in a particular foster home.
4. How many new foster homes were licensed in North Carolina in state fiscal year 2005-06?
5. What does the Family Support Network of NC do?
6. According to the recent study by Denuwelaere and Bracke, which factor had the strongest influence on a foster child's self-esteem?
7. What are the mandates of the federal Child and Family Services Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288) with regard to visits between child welfare workers and children in foster care?
8. Make a list of ten people you know who are not currently foster parents who might be interested to know that there are teenagers in foster care in North Carolina right now who are in need of a foster family.
9. What is Elizabeth Cassidy's mantra when reactions to trauma come back into her children's lives?
10. Name four things you can do to support the schooling of children and youth in foster care.

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UNC School of Social Work
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You Helped Me

by Ronda, age 15

I used to think death was my way
But you taught me to cope with it day by day.
You were there when the flashes of the past
Depressed my mood very fast!
Your kindness comforted me
And showed me I truly want to be
Alive, not dead,
And not living my days in dread!
You helped me find happiness.
Even my days dress their
Selves in confidence and hope.
Even though I shouldn't gloat,
My life is better since you were here
For me—even when I didn't want you there!
Time after time fears of the past took over
And I would run for cover
And you'd be there to calm me
And you were there to lead me
To find happiness within
Myself!