

fostering perspectives

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

CPS: Implications for foster parents

Some people dream of visiting Vegas or the casinos in Cherokee and striking it rich. Foster parents are gamblers of a different kind. Rather than betting money on the slots, foster parents risk their time, resources, and love in the hope of winning a better life for foster children.

Clearly, it's a risk worth taking. Under their attentive care, foster children often stabilize, grow, and blossom. By opening their homes foster parents give families time to heal and reunite, and they make it possible for new families to form through adoption. Every day, foster parents put themselves and their families on the line, and our society benefits.

Yet some foster parents are unaware of all the risks they take. Although no one goes into fostering blind—to become a licensed foster parent in North Carolina one must have 30 hours of preparatory training—many foster parents never realize just how vulnerable they are until someone alleges they have abused or neglected their foster children. To be prepared to face this challenge, they must understand the implications child protective services (CPS) investigations have for foster parents.

Always A Possibility

Unfortunately, being investigated by CPS is a real possibility for every foster parent. According to the N.C. Division of Social Services (2002) foster parents are more than twice as likely as other people to be the subject of a child maltreatment investigation. Most of these investigations do not result in a finding of abuse or neglect. Indeed, allegations of abuse and neglect by foster parents are found to be unsubstantiated (that is, untrue) *at least as often* as are allegations against other parents and caretakers.

Yet some foster parents do commit child abuse and neglect. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services believes that of the estimated 826,000 children who were maltreated in the nation in 1999, 1.5% (approximately 12,390) were maltreated by "substitute care providers," a category that includes

foster parents, residential care providers, and child care providers (USDHHS, 2002). Though it accounts for only a small portion of the child maltreatment that occurs, this figure is alarming simply because foster care is a place specifically designed to keep children safe.

Why do some foster parents abuse and neglect foster children? There can be many reasons. For example, the exceptional stresses involved in fostering may be too much for some individuals or families, especially in cases where foster parents are overburdened by several children with serious difficulties. Insufficient training and support from DSS can contribute to these situations. In other instances, foster children who want to provoke an abusive reaction from their foster parents may succeed in causing a foster parent to lose self-control. Another factor can be DSS's lack of information about a child at the time of placement, which can cause foster parents to accept responsibility for a child when, had they known all the facts, they would have known they could not handle the child.

Most Investigations Unsubstantiated

For every abusive foster parent there are many more who are reported to have maltreated their foster children even though they have not done so. In a way, these foster parents are simply part of a larger trend—most maltreatment allegations in this country are not substantiated. For example, in 1997, fewer than one in three North Carolina child maltreatment reports was substantiated (ACF, 1998).

Yet some credible sources say that foster parents are at greater risk than other people of being reported without good cause. These sources include the N.C. Division of Social Services, which addresses this topic in its *Child Protective Services Manual* (2002), and the National Foster Parent Association, which asserts in a position statement on this issue that in 1997 foster and adoptive parents had a 1 in 8 chance of having false abuse or see CPS, p. 2

Being investigated by CPS is a possibility for every foster parent.

Get training credit for reading this newsletter!

If you are a North Carolina foster parent you can 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 in-service training requirement. Questions about this method of gaining in-service credit? Contact the N.C. Division of Social Services at 919/733-7672.

In-Service Quiz, v7 # 1

1. In what year did North Carolina's Guardian ad Litem program begin?
2. In what North Carolina county does Anita Robinson-Christmas live?
3. What are some of the things you should take into account when considering adopting your foster child?
4. Describe a structure foster parents can use to prepare a report to their foster child's GAL.
5. Name five things you can find when you visit the Jordan Institute for Families' VRC.
6. What are the four core strategies of the *Family to Family* initiative?
7. What are some tools for helping children cope with foster care-related transitions?
8. What is the name of the organization that developed MAPP/GPS?
9. Name 5 things that may help foster parents reduce their chances of being suspected of child maltreatment.

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neglect allegations made against them—a level of risk much higher than that faced by the average parent.

The N.C. Division of Social Services explains some of the reasons for this increased risk in its *Child Protective Services Manual*. For example, children who have experienced abuse and neglect, as well as the uncertainties and insecurities of years in foster care—often with many moves—may be wounded in ways that influence their behavior. These children may use an allegation to get out of a placement, as an act of revenge, as a way of distancing themselves from caretakers because they fear intimacy or are unable to trust, or because they believe an investigation of foster parents will enable them to return to their biological parents.

Reports of abuse may also stem from a general misunderstanding of foster parents and their role in society. Many people outside the child welfare system do not understand why someone would choose to be a foster parent, especially for children with difficult behaviors or handicapping conditions. Some community members, well-intentioned but uninformed and suspicious of foster parents' motives, may make baseless reports to DSS.

Birth parents are another possible source of maltreatment allegations against foster parents. Birth parents may report their child's foster parents out of jealousy, resentment, or as a way to justify their own past behavior.

Investigation Procedures

All North Carolina foster parents should understand CPS policies and procedures. Below is a brief overview, but we encourage you to learn more by following the links we give and by talking to your licensing worker.

Steps/Issues in a CPS Investigation

- The report must meet the state's legal definitions of abuse, neglect, or dependency. If it does not, no investigation occurs.
- For reports of abuse, investigation must be initiated by the county receiving the report within 24 hours; for cases of neglect or dependency, the county must initiate an investigation within 72 hours. Initiation includes face-to-face contact with all children living in the home.
- CPS must interview people thought to have knowledge of the alleged maltreatment.
- Following the information-gathering phase of the investigation, CPS must decide whether or not the foster family harmed the child through their action or inaction. (This is the phase where DSS decides whether to substantiate the report.)
- Report the outcome of the investigation to the Central Registry and, in the case of a substantiation, other parties.

There are steps foster parents can take to protect themselves from child maltreatment allegations.

For much greater detail about this process, please consult "Investigative Assessment in Out-of-Home Living Arrangements" in the *N.C. Division of Social Services Children's Services Manual* <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-60/man/CS1416-01.htm#P49_8964>.

It is also worth noting that the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) are in the process of developing national practice guidelines for social workers investigating foster parents for abuse and neglect. It is still too early to say whether this effort, which is a work in progress, will influence policy or practice in North Carolina. To learn more about this Casey/CWLA collaboration, go to <http://www.casey.org/cnc/policy_issues/allegations_of_maltreatment.htm>.

If You Are Investigated

The following suggestions are designed to inform foster parents of what you should do if you are investigated by CPS in response to a report of child abuse, neglect, or dependency:

Remember that when a report is made all the children in a home are considered alleged victim children. This includes your own children. North Carolina law requires this.

Remember that DSS is not only your partner in providing care for foster children, but also required by law to conduct investigations of reports of abuse, neglect, or dependency in all circumstances where children reside in out-of-home care. North Carolina general statutes, administrative code, and policy also mandate certain activities and interviews must take place during such an investigation. It is a conflict of interest for your licensing agency to conduct the investigation. Another, unbiased agency will be assigned to conduct the investigation.

Cooperate with both your licensing agency and the investigating agency to complete the investigation and resolve any issues of concern.

- Ask questions about the allegations and the process of the investigation until you understand to your satisfaction. It may help to write down the answers to your questions.
- Make sure you and all children living in your home are available to be interviewed by the CPS social worker. These interviews are required by policy and administrative code, since all children living in a residence are considered as alleged victim children. Interviews with children may be held in private.
- Allow CPS to visit your home. Law, policy, and administrative code require this.
- Make any records or documentation you have kept concerning the child readily available for the social workers to examine.
- Do not attempt to have the child examined by a doctor or other professional without the agency's authorization.
- Do not "investigate" the allegations on your own by questioning the child involved.
- Provide a list of collateral contacts and witnesses the social worker may interview to gather all relevant information see CPS, p. 3

VIEWSON FOSTER CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA

fostering perspectives

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Web site. Current and past issues of *Fostering Perspectives* are available online at <<http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/fp/>>.

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about your situation or alleged incident of child maltreatment.

Know and exert your rights, as you deem necessary.

- Consult an attorney.
- Document or record interviews and conversations with social workers.
- Have witnesses present during every contact with the investigating social worker. It may be helpful if this witness is well-respected in your community.
- Request copies of safety, risk, and strengths and needs assessments completed by the social worker.

Take care of yourself and your family.

- Call for support from your local, state, or national foster parent association.
- Join a support group or seek the emotional support of others (including professional counselors) as needed.
- Use your licensing social worker as a source of support and information.

Remember this is not a “win-lose” situation and the agency is not your adversary. Together you and the agency can partner to maintain foster children in a safe, nurturing, permanent home.

Protecting Yourself

The following steps may help foster and adoptive parents protect themselves from allegations of child maltreatment:

Before a child is placed into your family, write the placing agency and specifically ask that any history of physical or sexual abuse of the child be documented in writing. If the child has had several foster care placements, also ask whether the child has ever made an unsubstantiated report against a caretaker. Insist on a written response. Keep this response for your records.

Insist on written placement agreements. Do not accept a child into your home without a placement agreement stipulating the agency's expectations, roles, goals, plans, and information on the child.

Develop a pre-placement “questionnaire” to be answered before you accept a child into your home. Information you should collect includes: the reason the child is in foster care, a description of the environment in the child's home at the time of his or her removal, whether the child has been sexually abused, the child's previous history and experiences in foster care, the status of the child's siblings, words or behaviors to which the foster family should be sensitive, etc.

Keep written records. Take notes on the child's progress and daily events in your home in a spiral notebook. Entries should consist of descriptive observations, not opinion (“His temperature was 102.5,” not, “He was very hot”). Use a new page for each entry, put a date at the top, and mark through

False Accusations: One Foster Parent's Story

In many ways, foster parent Carol Nixon's experience of being investigated for child abuse is classic. It began with misinformation: when a brother and sister were placed in her home by another county DSS, she asked that agency if the children had a history of sexual abuse, and she was told they did not. She later learned that they had both been severely sexually abused.

After the boy moved from her home to a pre-adoptive placement he claimed, possibly as an attempt to sabotage the adoption, that he had raped Nixon's 3-year-old foster son while staying at her home. When the boy's therapist called to tell her about this allegation, Nixon knew it was impossible based on the details in the boy's story. Despite this, she had the 3-year-old examined by a doctor, who found no evidence of abuse. To keep them fully informed, Nixon told her county DSS of the older boy's allegations.

Soon after, she received a letter informing her that because she and her husband may have allowed this sexual assault to happen they would be investigated for child neglect. When she called her DSS to find out what was going on, her licensing worker, the person she was closest to at the agency, told her she could not speak with her about the case. The worker explained later that, based on its interpretation of State policy, her county DSS prohibited licensing workers from having contact with foster parents undergoing CPS investigation.

Nixon and her husband felt powerless, confused, and uninformed about the investigative process. “Worst of all,” she says, “the people at my county DSS didn't tell me they were going to abandon me. I was left with no support.”

In keeping with State policy, the CPS unit from another county DSS conducted the investigation. “It was

“It was pure hell, what we went through.”

pure hell, what we went through,” Nixon says. “I was crying all the time for months. We knew we had done nothing wrong, but we felt like bad parents.”

It was some comfort, Nixon says, that the CPS worker was gracious and kind.

When the investigator left she told Nixon, “You have nothing to worry about.” It also seemed a positive sign that, during the investigation, her agency did not remove the foster children from her home.

Though the investigation, which took months to complete, cleared Nixon and her husband of child neglect, she was still very angry with her county DSS. “I was so angry I couldn't even look at them—it was eating me alive. I seriously considered not fostering anymore.” She was upset that she was denied access to the final report that cleared her name. The thing she was most angry about, though, “was the fact that I was completely abandoned by the agency when I needed support the most, and that I had not been told this would happen if an investigation occurred.”

In the end Nixon decided to continue fostering on the condition that all future MAPP training in her county strongly emphasized the risks of false allegations foster parents face and the procedure agencies must follow when a report against a foster home has been accepted. Her agency eagerly accepted this condition, going so far as to invite Nixon to speak during this part of one MAPP training event. Her agency also continues to place children in her home.

During this ordeal Carol Nixon had virtually no one to whom she could turn for support. If you or another North Carolina foster or adoptive parent you know is going through a CPS investigation and needs support, Ms. Nixon invites you to contact her via e-mail at <nixons@pinehurst.net>.

the rest of the page at the end of the entry. Always keep a copy of materials you share with your agency.

Establish a relationship with birth parents. Developing a positive, respectful relationship may reduce the chances that birth parents will make baseless maltreatment allegations against you. A good way to demonstrate respect is to ask for birth parents' advice as a means of giving them back some control—for example, ask them about the child's food preferences, or how they prepare the child's favorite meals.

Be part of the team serving the child. Get to know the names and contact information of other team members. Let DSS know when you have had difficulty with a child or the child is sick or injured in any way—this is especially important prior to family visits, when birth parents are most likely to raise allegations.

If a child is sexually reactive, acts out sexually, or has provocative behavior, the

adults and older children in the household should always be sure to have another adult nearby or in the same room for the protection of the parent and the child.

Children who have been sexually abused can be more likely to become victims again. Even if a child has a history of making unsubstantiated reports, always take new allegations seriously. The child may truly become a victim of sexual abuse again.

Conclusion

Knowing how foster parents become involved with child protective services, the procedure investigating agencies must follow, and ways to prevent and survive an investigation are all critical pieces of information for North Carolina's foster parents. For more information on this topic, the references used in this article, and links to additional resources, visit *Fostering Perspectives* online at <http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/fp_vol7no1/vol7no1.htm>.



North Carolina Foster Parents

Visit the Association's Web Site at <<http://www.ncfosterparents.org>>

News from the Association President

By Sheryl Ewing, President of the N.C. Foster Parents Association

As you know, the mission of the North Carolina Foster Parents Association (NCFPA) is to promote quality foster and adoptive services through collaborative advocacy, education, resources, and networking. To accomplish this broad mission, this year we are focusing on several objectives.

First, we are working to establish organized communications between foster parents and agency staff, and between foster parents and local, state, and national associations. On a state level we are working toward this goal by publishing our own newsletter and contributing articles to *Fostering Perspectives*. By actively participating in community foster parent associations, our board members are also seeking to create channels of support and communication between the statewide NCFPA and local foster parent associations. Please know that as an organization we are available to help you start a local foster parent association if you do not have one.

This year the NCFPA is also working to help foster parents across the state develop themselves professionally. As part of this effort we are holding our annual conference, which will occur on November 16 and 17 in Durham and feature many workshops and opportunities for sharing information. We also actively encourage additional foster parent training in local areas. One example of an upcoming local training is *Coming Together*, a conference that will offer 5 hours of foster parent training in Wilmington on February 17, 2003. For more information about this event, contact the Family Support Network of Southeastern North Carolina at 910/792-6133.

To achieve its overall mission the NCFPA also promotes its interests and purpose with the National Foster Parent Association, to which it belongs. If you are not already a member, I encourage you to join both the N.C. Foster Parents Association and the National Foster Parent Association.

We would love to have more of our membership involved as we pursue our goals this year. Please contact us if you would like to volunteer. You can contact me by phone (910/792-6133, work), e-mail (fsnsenc@wilmington.net), or fax (910/792-6132).

As foster parents we play a very important part in improving the lives of foster children in North Carolina. I believe that through the North Carolina Foster Parents Association we can make an even bigger contribution. Thank you for all that you do for children.



Sheryl Ewing

Association to elect new board members at November conference

Now is the time to join or renew your membership with the N.C. Foster Parents Association. At our November conference you will have the chance to exercise two of the most exciting rights membership in the association confers: the right to vote in the election of our board of directors and, if you wish, the right to seek election to the NCFPA board of directors.

Unfortunately this newsletter will probably go to press after registration for the November conference closes, so you may have missed your chance to attend this event if you have not already registered. (To find out, visit the NCFPA web site.) Even so, if you are an NCFPA member and want your name to be included on the ballot, it may not be too late. If you want to be considered for election to the board, contact us right away.

Other Ways to Serve

Even if you are not on the board of directors, there are many ways you can serve the association. Following is a listing of our committees, each of which would benefit from your expertise:

Infrastructure and Organizational Committee: Focuses on the organizational structure of the association, including by-laws, strategic planning, and board development.

Finance and Budget Committee: Focuses on monitoring and maintaining the association's budget and finances, and on membership activities and other fundraising strategies, including grant writing, donations, etc.

Communications Committee: Focuses on both internal communications (membership directories, newsletter, etc.) and external communications (publicity, media relations, web page).

Program Committee: Focuses on the "program" activities of the association—the services the association offers to foster, adoptive, and kinship parents, such as the annual conference.

How to become a member

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: NCFPA, P.O. Box 1064, Youngsville, NC 27596. Make checks payable to the NC FOSTER PARENTS ASSOCIATION.

Membership Dues: Individuals = \$15 Couples = \$25 Local FP assoc. = \$25 Agency/business = \$100

First name #1: _____ First name #2: _____

Last name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

County: _____ Licensing Agency: _____

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Membership Amt. included: _____ Donation Amt.: _____

Association Update



Love languages help you connect with others by Becky Burmester

Help! I'm drowning! This feeling is part of who we are as adoptive, foster, and kinship parents. We are people who care—sometimes too much for our own good!

The books I am reviewing in this column can be part of the solution to our feeling overwhelmed. Each of the books is available on audio cassettes for those of us who must always multi-task!

It may sound dramatic, but reading *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman and attending a workshop influenced by this book changed my relationship with my children and my spouse. Through Chapman's book I learned that each of us was showing the other love, but doing so in the way that mattered to us. A giant light bulb came on as I realized that my spouse and children were not feeling the love I thought I was expressing through my countless "acts of service." My husband and my daughter each measured my love for them by the amount of quality time I spent with them. My son found my love for him in words of affirmation. Gifts

and physical touch are the other love languages explored by this book.

Amazing, positive things happen in relationships when you take the time to speak the other person's primary love language. At first I was feeling pretty uncomfortable with the transition to "words of affirmation" as I interacted with my teenage son. To me, they did not say "I love you" in the way clean clothes and homemade cookies did. But the truth was that while the cookies and clean laundry were nice, they did not say "I love you" to my son. My spouse and children began to realize that straightening up the house without my asking them to was an "act of service" which said to me that I was loved.

Gary Chapman has written two other books, *The Five Love Languages of Children* and *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*, to help you identify the primary love language of the children and teens in your life. Each book contains many specific examples to aid you in identifying the primary love language of the

young people you love. Recognizing love languages reduces frustration and improves daily interactions. Foster parents with an understanding of the five languages will find that adding children to the family will be easier when they are able to identify the love language of the newcomers.

The books and tapes are available through the N.C. Foster Parents Association web site link to Amazon.com. NCFPA receives a portion of the proceeds when items are ordered through the link at our web site. Many libraries also have these books.

Don't forget to be good to yourself by attending the 5th Annual NCFPA Training Conference November 16 and 17, 2002 in Durham. If you have questions about this column or suggestions for future columns, please contact me (919/870-9968, bekybnc@aol.com).



GALs and the best interests of the child by Sheryl Ewing

I recently had the opportunity to attend a 30-hour, pre-service training course for guardians ad litem (GALs). Thanks to this experience, I have a much better understanding of the responsibilities, power, and influence of GAL volunteers. I believe this is something all foster parents should understand, and so I would like to share a little bit of what I learned with you.

North Carolina's GAL Program

In 2003 the North Carolina Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. State law established this mandatory program in 1983; by 1997 it was established in all the judicial districts in our state. North Carolina currently has 61 GAL offices run by trained program staff, including attorneys and GAL volunteers.

Guardians ad litem exist to present the child's best interest to the court. They are appointed to serve all court-involved children who have been abused or neglected. Judges may also appoint GALs in dependency proceedings, although this is less common.

The GAL program and the N.C. Division of Social Services share the same ultimate goal: a safe, permanent, caring home for

every child within one year.

The GAL has the power to access all information about the child and his or her family. The GAL must use this information to make a recommendation to the court regarding the child's best interests.

Pursuing the Child's Best Interests

I have worked much of my career with adults and children with developmental disabilities, so I'm used to multidisciplinary teams. As a foster parent I tend to operate in this same way, working to create a team of people who care about each child and who can work together to create a "best interest plan" for the child, so to speak. To me, applying the best interest principle means identifying a safe, permanent home for the child as quickly as possible.

As a foster parent I have felt that my foster children's GAL volunteer is the most important person working for them. Therefore I am willing to discuss at length with this person how I view the children and their best interests. I do this in part because, as a foster parent, I am sometimes frustrated at the small role foster parents play in shaping the future for children who are hurting.

I am an advocate in my career and I am

also an advocate for my foster children. Working closely with GALs, who have real power in court, and ensuring that they are a fully-informed part of the best interest team serving your foster child may help you feel more empowered and less frustrated with the legal process and the child welfare system.

Another way foster parents can contribute is by learning to write and submit objective, factual court reports to help judges understand foster children, their needs, and any additional information that might help them determine children's best interests. (For more on this, see page 12).

I appreciate the GAL volunteer program and I am glad there are strong and dedicated GAL volunteers giving a voice of hope to abused and neglected children. Some day I may even decide to become a GAL volunteer myself.

To Learn More, Visit These Sites:

North Carolina Guardian ad Litem Homepage
<http://www.aoc.state.nc.us/www/public/aoc/GALhome.html>

The Role of the Guardian ad Litem
http://ssw.unc.edu/crcp/fp/fp_vol3no2/role_of_gad.htm

Moving from foster care to adoption by Jeanne Preisler

On average, about 65% of the adoptive parents in North Carolina were formerly the foster parents for their adopted child. So, chances are pretty good that at one time or another, a child in your home will become legally free for adoption and you may be asked to consider making a permanent commitment to him or her. This is consistent with North Carolina's goal of *one permanent placement for each child in his or her own community*. The goal is that each county will have enough diversity among its foster parents that a "good match" can be made with the initial placement. In the event that reunification with the child's birth family is not in the best interest of the child, he or she may have the option to stay with you permanently.

If this is the case, there are many things for you to consider as you make your decision. I spoke with representatives from the NC Division of Social Services as well as former foster parents who have adopted to compile the following information. I hope it will be helpful if you should choose to move from foster care to adoption.

Are you approved to adopt?

When you become a foster family, you are *licensed* to provide temporary care and shelter for children. This foster care *license* differs from an *approval* to adopt children. Although the process to attain your foster care *license* and adoptive *pre-placement assessment (homestudy)* is similar, they are two distinct processes. If you are not already *approved to adopt*, your agency will need to ensure that all of their requirements are met and complete your adoption pre-placement assessment.

In cases where the family is being considered for a specific child (many times the foster child in the home already), some agencies will complete what we refer to as a 'child-specific' assessment. This means the final written recommendation of the assessment is specific to the child you plan to adopt and may state something like "Mr. and Mrs. Jones are approved to adopt Johnny Smith." If there is the possibility you may want to adopt again in the future, you may wish to ask your agency to approve you to adopt in general. In this case, your pre-placement assessment might recommend that "Mr. and Mrs. Jones are approved to adopt up to two children, ages 5-15, of any gender and race with moderate emotional, physical, and/or learning needs."

North Carolina's *pre-placement assessments* are valid for 18 months, but should

be updated whenever there is a major change in the family's situation.

Have you seen the child's pre-adoptive summary?

Each child in the custody of a North Carolina county department of social services has received numerous services ranging from educational assessments to psychological assessments and counseling. When the plan becomes adoption, the child's caseworker develops a written, *pre-adoptive summary* shortly after the child becomes legally free for adoption. This summary is a comprehensive history of the child's circumstances and special needs.

The pre-adoptive summary documents why the child was placed in foster care, the background of his or her birth parents, and his or her experiences in foster care, including a summary of all placements and services received. The pre-adoptive summary outlines any medical, educational and/or emotional special needs this child has and any potential handicapping conditions the child might be predisposed to based on the background information known to the agency. While the child's agency makes a good faith effort to obtain all vital information, some important facts may be withheld from social workers. The pre-adoptive summary also discusses the child's eligibility for adoption subsidy, relationships to birth and foster family, as well as school issues and any current behavior issues.

If a child has been in your home for quite some time, you may feel as though you know this child and do not see the need to review his or her pre-adoptive summary. I urge you to review this summary, however, because the information it contains is key to fully understanding the child and may, in fact, provide you with information that may not have been previously disclosed to you. Having your child's complete history will help you successfully parent him or her in the future and help you answer questions your child might have.

Will you be expected to continue with birth family or sibling visitation?

As you already know, children will never and should never forget their birth families. The child may have a relative who is very important to the child and has regular contact with the child, but may not be able to adopt. In some cases, it is not in one or more of the siblings' best interest to be placed together, yet they will yearn



In the event that reunification with the child's birth family is not in the best interest of the child, he or she may have the option to stay with you permanently. If this is the case, there is much for you to consider.

for one another. The child's agency may talk with you about your ability to continue relative and/or sibling visitation or contact after the adoption is finalized. Please know your family's strengths well enough to know whether or not you would be able to do this, and be honest with your social worker about your comfort level with birth family contact. Your social worker will be able to help you problem solve if they know your concerns up front.

What type of financial assistance will you receive?

As a former foster parent, I know that no one becomes a foster parent because of financial incentives. No one chooses to adopt because of financial incentives, either. But, every little bit helps provide the necessary clothes and food as well as the therapy and educational services often needed. The child's agency must determine what subsidies the child qualifies for shortly after the child is legally free for adoption. They may ask you if you would be able to adopt without financial assistance, but as we all know, that is often unrealistic. The majority of children in the foster care system in North Carolina will be eligible for some form of adoption subsidy. If you are told that a child is not eligible for adoption assistance and wish to appeal, please contact the State Office (800-662-7030) for assistance. At a minimum, most children typically qualify for cash assistance, vendor payments, Medicaid, and post-adoption services. The agency must discuss subsidies with you prior to the finalization of adoption. continued p. 7

These subsidies will begin the first of the month after the adoption has been finalized. Your foster care board rate will continue until the finalization of the adoption. This can result in a temporary reduction in the financial support you receive. For example, if you finalize the adoption on the 5th of the month, your board rate payment will be only for those five days and your adoption subsidy will not begin until the 1st of the following month. **Cautionary Tip:** If this short-term reduction in the board payment would create a financial hardship for your family, inform your social worker. He or she will then know to complete the paperwork for finalizing the adoption and send it to the clerk later in the month, rather than early in the month, thus reducing or avoiding a financial hardship for your family.

The monthly cash assistance is currently the same rate as the foster care board rate (unless the child's agency makes other arrangements). That rate is \$315 for children ages 0-5; \$365 for children ages 6-12; and \$415 for children ages 13-18. Vendor agreements are \$2,400 a year and can be used to help offset medical and/or therapy costs that Medicaid does not cover in addition to numerous other remedial services your child may need to alleviate a condition that existed prior to the adoptive placement. Examples of remedial services include, but are not limited to, tutorial service, tuition, specialized day care, braces for teeth, repair of broken glasses, respite care, specialized clothing or equipment, computers, etc. Some children also qualify for a one-time reimbursement up to \$2,000 for non-recurring costs. Non-recurring items could include such things as the cost of your pre-placement assessment, including physical and psychological examinations, transportation and reasonable costs of lodging and food for the child and/or the adopting parents when necessary to complete the placement or adoption process, adoption fees, court costs, attorney fees, and/or supervision of the placement.

Post-adoption support (including therapy, support groups, respite, etc.) varies from agency to agency. This, in my opinion, is one of the most crucial aspects you should discuss with your agency. How accessible will your agency be to you for advice? What are your options for respite care? Are there support groups in your area? It is always best to know ahead of time what you can expect from your agency after finalization. That way you will be able to formulate a plan for post-adoption services which meets your families needs.

These are just some of the key items to think about when you are considering adopting a child. Your role as foster parents is critical in these children's lives. If they are in your home one month, one year, or a lifetime, you are making a tremendous impact on them by providing a safe, loving environment.

For more information on adoption in North Carolina, please call the NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network toll-free at 877-625-4371 (877-NCKIDS-1). Representatives are available from 7 A.M. until 7 P.M., Monday through Saturday.

Jeanne Preisler is the Director of NC Kids, which works to improve the placement outcomes for the children of North Carolina awaiting adoption.

Parents Wanted, by George Harrar

Reviewed by Cassandra Colson



Parents Wanted, by George Harrar, is one of the best-written fiction stories I have ever read. I would strongly recommend that all prospective foster and adoptive parents read this book. Even though it is not a real account of a person's life, it could be. Why?

Because the majority of foster and adopted children and teens feel their parents should be the ones to suffer for their consequences.

I have never read a fictional account of someone's life that seemed so real. In the book, the main character, Andy, has a birth mother who is just no good. His birth father, whose "only occupation was a thief," puts Andy into DSS custody.

Andy, like many children in DSS custody, has learned how to manipulate the system and his guardians. And, thanks to his father, he knows how to steal. Andy has learned one set of rules from his birth parents and he has to learn another from his foster and adoptive parents.

When Andy goes to live with his adoptive parents he carries all of these misguided behaviors with him. He tells his adoptive parents, Jeff and Laurie, anything they want to hear. He also decides that they are like all of his past foster parents. So he begins to get into trouble so he can get sent back to "The Home" (the group home he used to live in) before he begins to like his new home. Andy is a very confused young man who really needs the help of someone who can take the time to listen to him and show him that he is worth fighting for.

What I really have in common with Andy is the reason he wanted to be adopted. At first he was interested in adoption simply because he was ready to get out of the "stinking" group home he was living in, since it was no fun. Eventually, though, he starts wanting parents who are cool and who would love him for who he is, faults and all.

To find out if this is really the kind of parents Jeff and Laurie are, Andy decides to push them to the limit to test their patience and love. I think that a lot of children in foster care feel this way. By the time Andy discovers his testing tactics didn't work, it seems too late. So Andy decides to falsely accuse Jeff of inappropriately touching him. As a result, Andy must move back to The Home until things get straightened out.

Andy really learns a lesson about friendship and integrity when he gets back to The Home. There he finds that his old friend, José, has a new roommate and a new friend. This leaves Andy to really think about where he wants his life to go now that he might not get a second chance.

The ending of *Parents Wanted* is so true. Stories don't always have to have a fairy tale ending when it comes to foster and adoptive families. But things do get better and the people involved do become a family. That's what this story says—that adoptive families aren't perfect and they definitely aren't going to be peachy keen to start off, but with time they can overcome their struggles and differences.

Cassandra Chavis Colson is a former foster youth and a board member for the youth advocacy group SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out)

Reflections on butterflies in foster care by Jessica Salinis

Butterflies are some of the most captivating and beautiful creatures in our environment. They start out as little caterpillars that struggle to get through each day. As nature takes its course, caterpillars develop wings and become beautiful butterflies with the freedom to fly. Adolescents in the foster care system are like butterflies that live with many struggles. The ultimate goal for them is to have a change in their life that will give them their wings of freedom.

Butterflies have many different colors. I am sure I've never seen two butterflies that have the exact same colors in the same places. Adolescents are very similar to butterflies in this respect. They all have shared some of the same experiences and feelings, but in different ways. If I envision teens in foster care as butterflies, the different colors on their wings can easily come to represent different things:

Red. When the butterfly first learned to trust and love. This moment in life is so important for the butterfly's development. Positive relationships with people depend on this experience.

Blue. The butterfly's school experiences. These experiences will mold the butterfly academically and socially for the future.

Green. The butterfly's history with his or her birth family. In my mind, green is captured mostly in the body of the butterfly, near its center. The feelings and events that the butterfly has towards its birth family will be an extremely crucial part of the butterfly's growth. The butterfly may grow and prosper immediately from the positive experiences and memories. Negative experiences, too, are the source of the butterfly's existence, but it takes a significant amount of time for the butterfly to grow from the negative experiences.

Yellow. The butterfly's feelings of loss and grief. These feelings culminate with the butterfly's experiences from its birth family. Together they ignite true growth for the butterfly. As they are very painful feelings, the butterfly learns that it must continue its purpose and continue to fly. In time the loss and grief heal and the butterfly becomes stronger.

Tan. The butterfly's experiences shared with friends. These experiences normalize the life of the butterfly. They give the butterfly the chance to reduce feelings of isolation and enable it to feel self-confident and carefree.

Orange. The butterfly's accomplishments in life. These experiences reconfirm its internal pride. With each challenge it overcomes, the butterfly develops a sense of its own strength.

Purple. The butterfly's love and support from others. The butterfly's success in flight will always depend on the existence of these feelings. The butterfly is very strong and does not depend on many things from people. However, it will always fly back to find comfort in the feelings of love and support. These feelings can easily take away the scary feelings of being empty and alone.

Light Blue. The dreams the butterfly has and the places it wants to go and see. This is why the butterfly has the power of flight—if it did not have a vision, there would be no need to fly.

Black. The wings on the butterfly are embedded with a strong black frame and body. The black frame separates the different experiences from one another and gives the butterfly the strength to fly.

Adolescents in the foster care system are butterflies, all of whom have experienced different events in their lives to become the people they are today. All the colors of their wings, combined with the strength of their body and the support from

others, creates their resilience. It is mesmerizing that there are so many butterflies flying beautifully throughout the world.

Like a butterfly's wings, the wings of an adolescent in the foster care system are very fragile. They must learn to be careful with their wings. They are susceptible to getting hurt very easily and falling. They must also remember to think situations through while allowing room to experience new things. If the butterfly does not keep going to new places, the butterfly will miss opportunities to see the greener grass, prettier flowers, and meet other butterflies.

These butterflies may fly beside other butterflies, but most are seen flying alone. Some stop and rest often, since the life of a butterfly can be very hard. It is hard work for the butterfly to fly all day searching for places to go.

The butterfly gains energy from the nectar of flowers. My hope and dream is that every foster care butterfly will find the nectar of support and encouragement that he or she needs to be successful in its flight and in its life.

Jessica Salinis, a former foster youth, is now the LINKS coordinator for Yadkin County DSS.

Further Reflection and Discussion

Consider sharing this article with an adolescent in foster care that you know. Ask him or her to read the article and then talk about it together, using the questions below as a guide.

- How has your life been like the life of a butterfly?
- The author connects the colors one sees on butterflies to the experiences, strengths, and needs of teenagers in foster care. Which one of the colors/qualities she describes do you relate to most?
- Which color do you relate to least?
- Do teenagers in foster care have experiences, strengths, and needs that are not touched on in this essay? If so, what are they?
- If the missing experiences/strengths/needs were colors, what color would they be?



Clearing Up Common Misconceptions About How People Get HIV/AIDS

You cannot contract HIV through normal everyday interactions with people who have HIV/AIDS. This includes shaking hands, hugging, kissing, crying, coughing, and sneezing. You also cannot contract the virus from water in pools or baths, from food or beverages, from towels, cups, dishes, straws, or other eating utensils, or from toilets, doorknobs, telephones, office equipment, or furniture. HIV is not transmitted through vomit, sweat, stool, or nasal secretions, unless these substances contain blood. Although the virus has been isolated in very small concentrations in tears, urine, and saliva, you cannot get HIV through contact with these fluids. In addition, you cannot get HIV from mosquito or other insect bites.

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by sharing needles and/or syringes (primarily for drug injection) with someone who is infected, or, less commonly (and now very rarely in countries where blood is screened for HIV antibodies), through transfusions of infected blood or blood clotting factors. Babies born to HIV-infected women may become infected before or during birth or through breast-feeding after birth.

If you have questions about HIV transmission, call the National AIDS Hotline (800/342-2437), or visit <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/general.htm#transmission>.

Kids' Page

Words and Pictures by Children in Foster Care

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Mystery of life

By Elisha, age 15

The mystery of life, what can be said?
We are put here for answers or until we are dead.

The truth is unknown, the puzzles we must solve
Yet sometimes it feels as if the Earth doesn't resolve.

Love is by far the worst pain and joy of them all.
When someone special leaves, my heart feels so small.

Sometimes it's meant, but this time it's not.
We think
However it's impossible for the memories to fade away.

Sometimes it's hard and we feel so alone.
Problems don't shrink—they have grown.

Love is one of those things you can't explain.
We try to let it out, but no one knows the pain.

Sometimes I can't understand how I feel.
I hope they know my love for them is real.

They say they will always be here for me.
I know their love is true.

The heartache is enough to make me cry every day.
I wish every foster child had foster parents like mine.

The days grow on and I waken.
I realize really if every foster child had parents like mine
They wouldn't know how real life is.

Respect your foster parents.
One day you will let them know how much they have
helped you.
Let them know how much you love them.

The mystery of life no one will ever know!

Author's Note: Now I'm adopted and very happy. Don't ever give up on life. It's rough, but you can make it, because I did. I have a sister who is four years old and we were adopted by different foster parents. Life is a mystery, it's what you want it to be . . .

Advice I'd have given myself: Learning from mistakes

by Sara Gardner

I didn't have the ideal childhood and I was very resentful, as are many other foster children. Also, I didn't really pay attention to the advice given to me. In hindsight, this is what I would tell myself.

I would tell myself that I shouldn't wait until I am 20 or 30 to start taking responsibility for my actions. I got into trouble over and over again until I realized that even as a teenager I had to start thinking ahead. I have come to realize that the choices I make as a teenager will affect the rest of my life.

For example, a few years ago I was given the choice to go back home with my mother. If I had thought about the long-term effects of this decision, I never would have gone back home. I only thought about how going home would give me more freedom and less responsibility. I put myself back into a bad situation and I ended up returning to foster care.

I would also tell myself not to procrastinate. This is one of my biggest faults. I always pushed things off and when these things did not get done, I had to face the consequences.

Even though I don't really know if I would have taken this advice in the past, I feel good knowing that I have matured and can reflect on my mistakes. The point of making mistakes is to be able to learn from them.

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A Chance to Express Yourself

Are you someone who is or has been in foster care? Would you like a chance to share your ideas and artistic talents with the foster parents and social workers who read *Fostering Perspectives*? If you answered yes to these questions, consider submitting a drawing, poem, essay, or other work of self-expression for publication in this newsletter. If your work is published in the newsletter, you will also receive a small cash award. Mail your submission to: John McMahon, Jordan Institute for Families, 340 Victoria Rd., Pines Bldg., Room 403, Asheville, NC 28801. Artwork should be mailed flat (unfolded) on white, unlined paper. Include your name, age, address, social security number (used to process awards only, your confidentiality will be protected) and phone number.

Family to Family: Five counties lead the way as North Carolina embraces foster care reform

by John McMahon

Cumberland, Durham, Guilford, Mecklenburg, and Wake Counties are in the process of transforming foster care in North Carolina. Earlier this year, these counties committed themselves to a national initiative called *Family to Family*. Sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and endorsed by the N.C. Division of Social Services, *Family to Family* seeks to reconceptualize, redesign, and reconstruct the foster care system in North Carolina and the nation. Casey and the Division hope that, because of their size, these five counties—which are responsible for the care of more than a third of North Carolina's nearly 10,000 foster children—will spark changes in child welfare practice and policy across the state.

The Vision

What kind of changes are we talking about? *Family to Family* envisions a child welfare system that does a better job:

- Providing services to families when maltreatment occurs, so children can remain safely in their own homes;
- Returning foster children in group homes and institutions to family-style placements in their neighborhoods;
- Involving foster families as team members in family reunification efforts;
- Strengthening communities from which the foster care population comes; and
- Providing permanent families for children in a timely manner.

Family to Family envisions a child welfare system that collaborates with others

to cultivate communities that support and nurture all families. *Family to Family* envisions a time when children who must be removed from their homes can stay with foster families in their own neighborhoods, sparing them the trauma of being separated from their friends, relatives, pets, schools, and all they know.

Pursuing the Vision

The Casey foundation has created strategies (see sidebar) and tools to help North Carolina and other participating sites make the *Family to Family* vision a reality. As the N.C. Division of Social Services' David Atkinson explains, these tools and strategies are really about changing the way we do business in child welfare. "We know where we want to go as a system. We see *Family to Family* as the vehicle, the catalyst that will take us there."

Because they cannot hope to achieve the initiative's vision without them, *Family to Family* counties are making special efforts to recruit, train, and support foster families. For example, soon after it joined *Family to Family*, Cumberland County Department of Social Services gave its local foster parent association an office and computer at DSS, as well as space for the association's clothes closet. Cathy Ferran, a program manager at Cumberland DSS, says her agency also surveyed foster parents to find out how it can better serve them. Now that they have this input Cumberland and the other pilot counties are striving to provide foster parents all the information they can about children prior to placement, to return phone calls in a timely way, and to respond to foster parents' other concerns.

In addition to reaching out to foster parents in this way, Alma Shelton, *Family to Family* project manager at Wake County Human Services, says her agency is making a concerted effort to promote contact between foster parents and birth parents and to involve them in family team decision-making. Also called "child and family teams," family team decision-making is a strategy that involves birth families, their supporters (such as a minister or family friends), foster parents, and other community members in decisions regarding the family.

A Foster Parent's Experience

Initially, some foster parents are skeptical about increased involvement with birth families. When she heard about *Family to Family*, Anita Robinson-Christmas, a fos-



"Family to Family is changing the way we operate."
—Alma Shelton, Wake County

ter parent in Wake County, says "I didn't think it would work. I thought, 'If I'm going to be right in the same neighborhood with the mother and she knows where I live, what's to keep her from coming and snatching her kids?'" I worried she might threaten me or make harassing phone calls. Those were my biggest fears."

Still, Robinson-Christmas was willing to give it a try. One month after she began caring for two girls, aged 3 and 6, their mother began attending Robinson-Christmas'

church, which was in the neighborhood where they both lived. Sharing this community, this "church family," made a huge difference to everyone, she says. Now, instead of seeing their mother every other week for an hour at DSS, the girls could see her once or twice a week at the church, where they would worship and eat together.

Reassured, Robinson-Christmas encouraged phone contact between the mother and the girls. "Sometimes the girls would just call their mom to say good-night. I could tell the difference in the children's attitude, and in the mother's attitude, too—she was more open, more positive."

After a few months, Robinson-Christmas was invited to participate in a meeting about the family. The facilitator was fair and neutral, she says, and helped everyone come to consensus about what would be best for the girls. Once they agreed, the facilitator wrote down what the team had decided and they all signed the document. In the end, the girls went to live with their mother's cousin.

Robinson-Christmas' doubts about *Family to Family* are gone. "This is different," she says. "This is very good for the kids." And her commitment to fostering is stronger than ever. One can hear the excitement in her voice as she reveals, "I'm getting a little boy tomorrow. He's three years old."

Those involved in this project agree *Family to Family* will positively influence North Carolina long after the initiative's Casey funding expires in 2004. As Shelton puts it, "This is not an initiative, its about changing the way we operate. The life expectancy of *Family to Family* is infinite."

To Learn More Visit

The Family to Family Home Page. <<http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/familytofamily/index.htm>>

The National Center for Resource Family Support. <http://www.casey.org/cnc/support_retention/nav_supports.htm>

Four Core Strategies

- **Recruitment, Training, and Support of Resource Families (Foster and Relative):** Finding and maintaining local resources who can support children and families in their own neighborhoods by recruiting, training, and supporting foster parents and relative caregivers.
- **Building Community Partnerships:** Partnering with a wide range of community organizations — beyond public and private agencies — in neighborhoods which are the source of high referral rates, to work together toward creating an environment that supports families involved in the child welfare system and thereby helps to build stronger neighborhoods and stronger families.
- **Family Team Decision-Making:** Involving not just foster parents and caseworkers, but also birth families and community members in all placement decisions to ensure a network of support for the child and the adults who care for them.
- **Self-Evaluation:** Using hard data linked to child and family outcomes to drive decision-making, and to show where change is needed and where progress has been made.

Source: Overview of Family to Family. Online. <<http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/familytofamily/overview.htm>>

The Foster Families Project: Seeking solutions and strengthening families



Whenever foster families gather, they share personal stories about the joys and experiences of being a foster family. Conversations flow easily and you learn quickly that many families are fostering premature infants or children with chronic illnesses, developmental delays, or other special needs. The Foster Families Project of the Family Support Network of North Carolina (FSN-NC) is working to help meet the challenges for families—including foster and adoptive parents, grandparents, and kin—who care for children who are medically fragile or who have special needs.

Since 1990, with funding from the N.C. Division of Social Services' Children's Services Section, the Foster Families Project has helped meet the needs of foster families caring for children who have special needs and/or who are at risk by providing them with information and support. The project has grown to include training activities for foster families, available through the eight community-based programs that participate in the project, all of whom are part of FSN-NC. As part of a commitment to collaboration, the Foster Families Project is establishing close working relationships between North Carolina's community-based Family Resource Centers and the local FSN-NC Programs.

Local Family Support Network programs offer training for foster families and service providers in their communities. Training topics have included attachment and bonding issues, behavior management, CPR and First Aid, helping children and parents deal with grief and loss, and dealing with education and school issues. FSN program coordinators work with local DSS staff in planning training. Many program coordinators also work directly with the NC Foster Parents Association's (NCFPA) local chapters in planning their activities. Karen Le Clair, Coordinator of the Foster Families Project, serves on the NCFPA Board as an ex-officio member.

The Family Support Network's central office is a part of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine. This office manages the

Central Directory of Resources (CDR), a resource for all of North Carolina—a large database that includes information about specific disabilities and disability-related issues, as well as information about

local resources and organizations that serve children and their families. Information is available to families and service providers through a web site (www.fsnnc.org), a toll-free number (800/852-0042), and e-mail (cdr@unc.edu). Calls are answered by a team of resource specialists. Ensuring that accurate information about services and resources is available for Hispanic families across the state is a priority for FSN, so a Spanish-speaking resource specialist is available to callers.

The Foster Families Project also houses an Outreach Library with videotapes, books, audiotapes, and other printed information in English and Spanish. Materials are mailed free of charge and sent with free return postage. Materials are available on a broad range of topics related to children with special needs. The library is a resource for all foster families, DSS staff, and trainers, who are welcome to use the materials to develop training workshops for foster parents and staff providing family support and family preservation services. Many local DSS agencies are encouraging foster families to use the FSN Outreach Library materials to obtain some of the ten hours of training that are required each year. A list of Outreach Library resources can be downloaded at the FSN-NC web site.

Irene Nathan Zipper, MSW, PhD, is the new Director of FSN-NC. She brings her years of experience as a social worker and her involvement on the faculty at the UNC-CH School of Social Work to her new role and believes the Foster Families Project is exciting and innovative. To learn more about the Foster Families Project, call Karen Le Clair, Project Coordinator, at 800/852-0042.

Unveiling the Virtual Resource Community (VRC)

Are you concerned about the cuts North Carolina is making in human services? Or would you like to find an article about some common mental health issues affecting children in foster care? Or do you have a question you would like to ask a social work researcher or teacher?

Then visit a new web-based tool—the Virtual Resource Community—where you can e-mail the General Assembly, find article and book citations, and connect with social work researchers and teachers.

Created by the Jordan Institute for Families, part of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work, with a grant from the Smallwood Foundation, the VRC is a virtual village with a library, a government building, and a community center.

The library is filled with citations of articles and books written by UNC-Chapel Hill social work faculty and contains links to other online libraries. The government building houses links to North Carolina and federal government agencies and includes a section of information for action. The community center is a lecture hall—a place where faculty showcase their research through downloadable PowerPoint presentations—and an information desk—where users can pose research-related social work questions and have them answered by content experts.

"The intent of the VRC is to become a "one-stop" resource for scholars, social workers, policy makers, families, and individuals to find and share information, as well as learn how to apply the latest research to enhance their work," said Jordan Institute Executive Director Nancy Dickinson.

Pending future funding, there are plans to expand the VRC by adding:

- **Frontline**—A place for real-time interactive discussions
- **The Loop**—A message board for users to share and solicit information
- **The Family Room**—A center where families can exchange information about services and resources

The VRC is accessible at <http://sswnt5.sowo.unc.edu/VRC/index.html>.



A foster parent asks . . .

Do you have information on foster parents testifying in court? We are trying to prepare sample letters that foster parents can write to the judge. Any information you have would be appreciated.

Response by Sheryl Ewing, NC Foster Parent Association President Judges have tremendous influence over children in the child welfare system. They have the authority to place a child in foster care, and it ultimately falls to them to decide whether it is safe for a child to return home. Therefore, it is natural for foster parents to want to share their perspective with the judges making decisions about their foster children. A written report or letter can be a good way to do this.

As foster parents, my husband and I wrote a letter to a judge regarding our foster children. It caught people involved in the case off guard because they weren't used to foster parents taking this kind of action. Still, this letter was accepted into court, even though the parent's attorney tried to have it thrown out.

Not all foster parent letters are so lucky. One way to increase the chances your letter will be accepted and considered by a court is to ask your child's Guardian ad Litem (GAL) to present it for you. As appointed advocates for children, GALs have special status in the courtroom, and the judge pays special attention to what they say. If the GAL likes your report, she or he can get it into court when no one else can.

As far as the format for a letter of this kind, I suggest the following formula, which is the same used by many GALs:

1. Introductory information
2. History
3. Facts
4. Description of needs and wishes of the child
5. Description of the resources available within the family to meet the child's needs
6. Description of the resources available within the community to meet the child's needs
7. Issues for the court's attention to protect and promote the best interest of the child
8. Recommendations for promoting the child's best interests
9. Signature and date

When writing this kind of letter, **STICK TO THE FACTS**. If you make any assumptions or become subjective, relate your thoughts back to facts you have already mentioned. Sometimes written reports may actually be preferred over verbal testimony, which can be filled with emotion (something judges cannot consider in making their decisions) and take up valuable court time.

When it comes to actually testifying in court, foster parents do not have any special right to be heard. As a child's foster parent, you certainly have a right to attend court reviews, but it is the judge's decision whether you may testify as a part of the court hearing. You should receive regular notices and invitations to agency review team meetings and court hearings for your foster child. Contact your licensing social worker, the child's social worker, or the child's social worker's supervisor if you are not receiving these notices in a **timely** way.

In North Carolina foster parents don't usually appear in court, but it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, in a past issue of *Fostering Perspectives* (vol. 5, no. 1), District Court Judge Gary Cash encouraged foster parents to come to court. He made no promises, however, noting that whether they would be able to testify depends upon whether they are called as witnesses.

If you have a question about foster care in North Carolina, please write, e-mail, or fax your question to us using the contact information found on page 2. We'll do our best to respond to your question either in a direct reply or in a future issue of this newsletter.

Little Feet, Little Minds

by E. L. Davis



They come into our lives one small child at a time,
Always scared and lonely and wondering what they'll find.
Their minds so full of questions and their eyes full of fear,
Always listening closely just to see what they can hear.

Little feet, little minds. So many children, so little time.

Once someone's little angel sent from heaven up above
Now battered, bruised, and broken and only wanting love.
You offer them affection just to see them pull away,
But you keep on trying, every single day.

A child is like a garden—without love, it won't grow.
But give it to them daily and soon it starts to show.
You see a little sparkle in eyes once filled with fear,
You hear a little laugh that sounds oh-so-dear.

Little feet, little minds. So many children, so little time.

Once someone's little angel, now ours for awhile,
That gives us hugs and kisses and a big, warm smile.
Now all those deep dark secrets they've kept locked up inside,
They start to tell them to you, a little at a time.
As you sit and listen to the words they say,
You ask yourself, "How come life turns out this way?"

Little feet, little minds. So many children, so little time.

Now the days are passing by and all their fears are too.
You hope you've made a difference with all you say and do,
And you know you have when you hear "I love you."
It makes it all worthwhile when bedtime comes at night,
And you get those hugs and kisses when you turn out the light.

Little feet, little minds. So many children, so little time.

Now as the love inside grows more and more each day,
The call you knew was coming finally comes your way.
They're coming to get the angel that someone threw away,
Now your heart is breaking because you know that they can't stay.

As you pack the memories that all of you have made,
You gently wipe away the tears streaming down your face.
And as you place each item a reflection you will see,
Of the child as they are today and how they used to be.

Little feet, little minds. So many children, so little time.

Once again the house falls silent of tiny little feet,
Gently, softly running, playing hide and seek.
Even though you're leaving, in our hearts you'll always stay
In a special place, safely locked away.
God bless all little angels sent from heaven up above.
May they all find families, filled with happiness and love.

Little feet, little minds. So many children, so little time.

E. L. Davis is a foster parent in Chatham County

NC adopts new standard for lifebooks

Lifebooks are now mandated for all children within 30 days of entry into foster care in North Carolina. This is a wonderful change! As you probably know, lifebooks document children's histories and trace their paths to help them make sense of their time with birth, foster, and/or adoptive families. As the North American Council on Adoptable Children (2000) points out, lifebooks capture memories that might otherwise be lost. They also provide us with:

- A tool for meaningful discussions;
- A method of conveying positive messages during childhood that will be remembered during adolescence;
- A chance to build self-esteem and positive ethnic identity; and
- A method of reducing children's divided loyalties between birth and foster or adoptive families.

In complying with North Carolina's new children's services rule, social workers and foster parents will want to work together to build the lifebook for each child in care. Often foster parents do not have

access to the information about the past for children in their care. Social workers can search the record and make the contacts necessary to create a book that summarizes the entirety of a life.

Foster parents can play an active role in helping children build lifebooks; adult guidance and participation in this process are important. Let the kids' pages be theirs, but include adult pages that contain more detailed information. Children of any age can create illustrations to make the book theirs. Teens may be able to develop their books with only moderate supervision, or they may need a great deal of assistance.

There are resources available to help with the process of creating lifebooks. Beth O'Malley, author of *My Foster Care Journey* and *Lifebooks*, gives readers lots of ideas about the importance of a lifebook and the how-to's of creating a lifebook.

Build Your Own Roots and Records Book, developed by Independent Living Resources, Inc., is another excellent lifebook

Lifebooks are truly gifts of self to the children in our care.

resource, especially for teens seeking independence. One of the more interesting aspects of *Build Your Own Roots* is that it was designed based on input from teens and young adults involved with foster care, who were asked what wanted they to see in a

lifebook. The resulting format is well organized, with fill-in-the blank pages and page protectors to hold original documents. North Carolina foster parent Becky Burmester, who has purchased this book, says, "When I use this book with my teen, I plan to make photocopies of the fill-in-the blank pages, since this book may be used for a decade or longer. Over the years, I expect to need a larger binder."

Lifebooks may be mandated, but they are truly gifts of self to the children in our care. Foster parents and social workers together can create a tangible record for the children in care.

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Resource Spotlight: Advocates for Children's Services by Kira Weiss

"The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Adopting this simple yet powerfully insightful quote as its rallying cry, Advocates for Children's Services (ACS) is fighting for children's rights in North Carolina. A special program of Legal Aid of North Carolina, ACS provides free legal representation to children across the state who need medical, psychiatric, special education, or foster care/adoption services. Priority is given to children who are involved in the foster care system, and emphasis is placed on securing the services promised to children under three federal government programs:

1. The **Medicaid** program promises early and periodic screening, diagnosis, and treatment
2. The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** promises a free, appropriate, public education
3. The **Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)** promises speedy, permanent placement

ACS often succeeds in getting children appropriate services and a safe, permanent home. But, because the promises of health care, special education, and safe, permanent families have never been fully funded at the state or national level, and because children are denied lawyers to assert their rights to such services, there are many stories that end sadly despite ACS's and others' efforts.

In addition to being concerned with the effects of underfunding children's services, ACS also finds it disturbing that current social policy sanctions the exclusion of children themselves from the dialogue surrounding their rights under the 3 big federal promises. Favoring a grassroots approach to action on behalf of children, ACS urges the young adults affected by this unwritten policy of exclusion, along with those adults who support them (such as foster parents, family members, social workers, and educators), to stand up and be counted.

Take Action

Wondering how you can help a child have a voice in decisions that affect his or her own life?

- Ask a child what he or she wants before making any decisions that will seriously impact his or her life, and seriously consider any requests he or she makes.
- Help ensure that all children involved in the foster care system attend all their court hearings and all other meetings at which important decisions are made about them. Help children prepare to participate in the hearing/meeting by discussing with them what to expect and how to best express their wishes.
- There is strength in numbers—join the North Carolina Foster Parents Association (see page 4 for joining information) and your local foster parent association and figure out how to advance your agenda together. If there isn't a local chapter, start one.
- Encourage foster children you know to join **SaySo** (Strong, Able Youth Speaking Out), the wonderful statewide advocacy organization for young adults involved in the foster care system.
- Contact a group such as ACS any time you or a child suspect a child's rights have been violated.

By doing these things you will be empowering a child today and laying the critical foundation for independence later. A child who knows how to advocate for him or herself possesses the most powerful tool there is for success in life.

For more information about Advocates for Children's Services, call (919) 865-7200, e-mail ACSinfo@legalaidnc.org, write PO Box 26087, Raleigh, NC 27601, or visit www.LegalAidNC.org. ACS welcomes your comments.

Kira Weiss is an Americorps Volunteer with ACS.

Retention: An integral part of recruitment by Sara West



Sara West

When we recruit families to be foster or adoptive parents we must remember to put forth more effort to retain them than it took to recruit them.

Before You Begin

Prior to recruiting new families it is necessary to establish a system of assessing the satisfaction of current families. Satisfying your current customers is important, because word of mouth can be your most effective tool in recruitment, both formal and informal. If your present customers are unhappy, then any recruitment efforts will be poisoned by an undercurrent of dissatisfaction. If they are completely satisfied with the services rendered by your agency, then you are ready to recruit.

Tracking families' satisfaction with the system should start before recruitment, continue throughout the foster care experience, and extend into post-adoption.

Recruiting Parents

Recruitment campaigns should be carefully thought out. Data should be accumulated about the children in care and projections must be made based on the data collected regarding the types of children that the agency anticipates will come into care. Job descriptions for foster parents and adoptive parents are essential to avoid any confusion about expectations.

Recruitment slogans and information should reflect the needs of the agency and agency expectations of foster and adoptive families. If this is not done, then you do not have "truth in advertising" and run the risk of recruiting people you do not need. In order to have a good public image of your program, the agency wants people who can be successful in meeting the needs of the children in care and the expectations of the agency. The agency can then enhance the relationship with both individual and public positive reinforcement.

Your recruitment efforts should involve the community through the use of committees whose members are representative of all parts of your community. This will enable you to create a strong foundation for support of potential foster and adoptive parents. It is especially important to have representation on your committees from the communities from whence children most frequently enter foster care.

The Multiethnic Placement Act/Interethnic Adoption Provisions requires child welfare services programs "to provide diligent recruitment of foster and adoptive families that reflect the racial and ethnic

diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed." Not only is this the law, it is good practice. Good practice means that we make every effort to keep children in communities where they can maintain connections with their family, school, and friends. Research shows that children who maintain frequent contact with their connections are more likely to be reunited with their families (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978) and are more likely to have a positive self-esteem (Weinstein, 1960).

Keeping Interest Alive

Once parents have been recruited, maintain their interest throughout the preparation and assessment process. This can be accomplished by face-to-face contact with the social worker, telephone contact, sending written materials, suggesting books related to foster care and adoption, assigning a foster parent buddy willing to involve the applicant in family activities, and getting the applicant involved in the N.C. Foster Parents Association.

Being able to begin the preparation and assessment process, either through offering a timely *MAPP-GPS* group or the course *Deciding Together*, is essential. Involving the applicants in a mutual decision process shows teamwork and a respect for the applicant. Retention occurs whenever people feel involved, respected, appreciated, and valued as a member of a team of professionals working together to create permanence for children. During this process the parents will meet all of the nonnegotiable requirements and work on other areas related to the twelve skills necessary for successful foster or adoptive parenting.

Once the family and the agency reach a mutual decision about the readiness of the family to foster or adopt, placement plans can be made. This may involve listing the family for either foster care or adoption, or it may mean the placement of a child.

Retention and Child Placement

The placement of a child brings on additional retention responsibilities. Working as a team means making the extra effort to include birth families, foster and adoptive families, and other involved persons in decision making. Support of foster and adoptive families includes—but is not limited to—consultation about the child and the case plan, in-service training, respite care, reimbursement for cost of care/adoption subsidy, recognition, support groups,

and post adoption services (Craig-Oldsen, 1999).

Our work does not end once an adoption placement is made. Resources

must be created to support families as they continue over time to care for children who have endured many losses and bear the scars of abuse and neglect. These resources include the financial and medical incentives already in place. They also include resources such as newsletters updating the parents on recent literature regarding special needs of adopted children, support groups, and creative ways of helping children maintain the connections so essential to their identity.

Managing Transitions

When it is time for a child to leave foster care, attention needs to be given to preparing the child, the foster family (including the foster parent's birth children), and the birth family. The adoptive family also needs preparation when the child is moving toward adoption. Life books need to be completed and permission for the child to move needs to be obtained from the significant persons in the child's life. Moving is a partnership effort and when care is taken to make the transition a planned one, retention of foster and adoptive families is more likely to occur.

Once the child is moved, the next step is to assess the strengths and needs of the former placement and make plans for strengthening and maintaining your partnership with this foster family.

These steps are reflected in the Recruitment and Retention Model developed by the Child Welfare Institute and found in the curriculum *Measure Twice, Cut Once: Using MEPA/IEP to Assess and Develop Foster Family Recruitment and Retention Strategies*.

Sara N. West is a program consultant with the Children's Services Section of the N.C. Division of Social Services.

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NC Kids Needs Your Help!

NC Kids is a statewide, comprehensive resource provided by the North Carolina Division of Social Services through a partnership with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Since 1999, NC Kids has provided information and referral services for prospective foster and adoptive families, social workers, and public and private adoption agencies. Our mission is to improve the placement outcomes for the children of North Carolina awaiting adoption. We do this by acting as an advocate for the children and families we serve.

As part of this effort, NC Kids is using a survey to collect information on the type of experiences, both positive and negative, that foster parents have throughout our state. The results from this survey will be provided to the Policy and Initiatives Team of the Children's Services Section of the N.C. Division of Social Services for discussion.

Although NC Kids cannot resolve specific issues raised by those who respond to this survey, we can assure you that the survey does represent an important opportunity for foster parents to have their voices and opinions about the child welfare system heard. By filling out and sending in this survey, you will be giving North Carolina the information it needs to make systematic improvements that will benefit foster families and the children they care for.

NC KIDS also guarantees that **any identifying information you provide will not be released to DSS unless you authorize us to do so.** Thank you in advance for your participation in this survey.

—Jeanne Preisler, Director, NC Kids



North Carolina Foster Parents Survey

Please mail completed form to: NC Kids/UNCG, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170 or Fax to 336-315-7479

Please check the box that best describes your answer.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. My relationship with my agency is good.					
2. Communication with my agency is good.					
3. I agree with the decisions my agency makes on behalf of the child(ren) in my care.					
4. I feel that I received adequate training to parent the child(ren) in my care.					
5. I feel my social worker is accessible in times of need.					
6. I feel there are adequate support groups for foster parents in my area.					
7. I anticipate that I will remain a foster parent for at least another two years.					
8. I have a desire to foster-to-adopt a child if I feel the child is right for my family.					
9. When reunification is the plan for the child(ren) in my care, I am involved in working with the birth parents.					
10. My agency encourages and supports foster parent and birth parent involvement when there are no safety issues that would prohibit contact.					

	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low
Overall, how would you rate your foster parenting experience?					

Are you a member of a local foster parent support group?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	What prompted you to become a foster parent? _____ _____ _____ _____
Are you a member of the NC Foster Parent Association?	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	
How many years have you been a foster parent?	_____		
Did you attend MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) meetings? If yes, when: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	

Comment Section (Describe any positive and negative issues you have faced, recommendations for improvement, etc.):

(Attach additional pages if needed)

Please complete the information below. It **WILL NOT** be released without your permission. If you would like your name included in the information submitted to the Division of Social Services, please initial here: _____

Name: _____	Agency Name: _____
Address: _____	Worker Name: _____
Phone: _____	Worker Phone: _____
Email: _____	Gender: _____ Age: _____
	Ethnicity: _____

Thank You for Your Feedback!



Four Adoption Terms Defined

This short poem by Rita Laws humorously points out the effect negative language can have on adoption.

1. Natural child: *Any child who is not artificial.*
2. Real Parent: *Any parent who is not imaginary.*
3. Your own child: *Any child who is yours to love.*
4. Adopted child: *A natural child, with a real parent, who is all my own.*

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Exciting new foster parent training

Exciting news! The N.C. Division of Social Services has announced a new training opportunity for foster parents. Beginning in 2003 the Division plans to offer a "train the trainer" course for MAPP/GPS certification for foster parents who have two or more years of experience. Completion of this training will certify foster parents to co-lead MAPP groups in partnership with a county DSS or a private child-placing agency.

The Child Welfare Institute, author of the MAPP/GPS curriculum, strongly recommends that MAPP be presented to prospective foster and adoptive parents by a pair of trainers, one of whom is an agency representative and one of whom is a foster parent. Yet in the past, the MAPP certification process has been difficult for foster parents to attend because it has only been held on weekdays during working hours. To make it easier for foster parents to become certified to co-train MAPP, the Division will begin holding this certification training at what we hope is a more convenient time. The training will be :

- Provided in 7 days rather than 8
- Offered on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of one week and then Friday, Saturday, and Sunday approximately 2 weeks later to reduce the amount of time participants must take off from work
- Covering information on training and presentation skills, as well as other topics pertinent for foster parent leaders
- Offered in the Greensboro area to provide centralized access for all areas of the state
- Offered at no registration cost (hotel, travel, and food expenses will be the responsibility of the participant or the sponsoring agency)

Contact Clarence Lamb of the NCDSS Staff Development Team at 919/733-7672 **after December 1, 2002** for a registration packet and details of the training.

To Every Child . . .

by Sue Badeau

To Every Child who moved to a foster home and was told:
"It's temporary,"

I rededicate my time to you.

To Every Child who changed homes alone without parents
or siblings to share common feelings,

I rededicate my time to you.

To Every Child whose packing boxes held shorts marked
with another kid's name,

I rededicate my time to you.

To Every Child who remembers a nice grandma, or mom, or neighbor,
But forgot her name, and no one here knows her,

I rededicate my time to you.

To Every Child who was "once a foster kid,"
running scared inside and raising hell outside,

I pledge more of me.

More talk with a community about your needs.
Meetings with families who can grow to understand
your anger and accept you still.

Phone calls and letters to change the laws that make you
"ward of" and not "son of" or "daughter of."

Pushiness to insist on change.

Newsletters to show others they are not alone in their efforts.
And there will be more from others.

Unless they get too settled in.

To Every Child . . .

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