

fostering perspectives

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www.fosteringperspectives.org

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

Letters from foster care

Fostering Perspectives tries to reflect the voices of people involved in North Carolina's child welfare system. That's why, in addition to featuring articles by and about foster and adoptive parents and social workers, every issue features writing and artwork by children who are or have been in foster care. This material usually appears in the middle of each issue.



As you can see, this time we have put the kids front and center. The letters you find here were submitted in response to last issue's writing contest, which asked the question: *If you could write a letter to your birth parent, what would you say?*

Selecting the contest winners was really difficult. We received many more submissions than we ever have before, and every entry was unique and personal. We were profoundly impressed by the willingness of these young writers to share their fears and dreams with us.

The letters we finally selected for publication in this issue were chosen in part because each reveals something special about the spirit of the person writing the letter. We also chose them because they reflect the different voices of youth in care: some are quite young, others nearly adults. Some have been adopted, others only recently separated from their parents. All these letters address one or more of the central issues faced by those who experience foster care and adoption. Among these are children's struggle for identity, their anger, and their deep love for their mothers and fathers.

We hope that as you read these letters you will reflect on the perspectives of these children and youth. Think about and celebrate the things you already do to make children's lives better. Think also about the additional things we all can do to help foster and adopted children heal, grow, and flourish.

—John McMahon, Editor

To read more responses to this writing contest, visit the online version of this issue at <<http://www.fosteringperspectives.org>>.

Jimmicka, age 10

Dear Mama,

I don't know where you are and sometimes I'm worried that you are dead. I wonder why you didn't want to come to our good-bye visit, and why you don't call our social worker. I feel scared that maybe something happened to you. I love you, Mama. Why did you do this? Why did you make us go into foster care? I wish you had kept us healthy by not giving us too much junk food. I wish you hadn't let anything hurt us, like the way Anthony hurt Laitsha's arm. When we were in the hospital for the doctors to fix Laitsha's arm, I was feeling scared. When Anthony got arrested I was happy.

Mama, I'm sad that we got taken away from you. I want you to be happy, but I don't think you are happy about me being adopted. I wish you could understand that I am in a good place now with Brigitte and Phil, because they do stuff with us we've never done before, and they discipline us, and they love us. Mama I hope that you are in a safe place, not hurt, and not worried. I hope that you are happy. I hope that you know we love you.

Love, Jimmicka

Jimmicka's letter took first prize, for which she was awarded \$100

Mama, I want you to be happy, but I don't think you are happy about me being adopted.

Lakeisha, age 13

Mama: . . . I'm living with this African lady just until the end of the school year, then I'm going back to this lady named Jane.* She is really nice, but don't worry, she will never be as good as you. And just to let you know, every foster parent I have lived with, I called them by their name and not mama, because I only have one mama, and that is you. I am very proud to be your daughter. . . Maybe one day me, you, Derrick, and Tony can go to Busch Gardens as a family. DSS is always telling me I am never going to see you again, but I don't listen to them. They're just trying to turn me against you, but it ain't goin' work. Cause when I turn 18, I'm coming to live with you. I don't care what anybody says, I'm coming to live with my Mama. See Mama, now I'm 13 years old. I only got five more years until I get to see you. That's not that long, is it?

Lakeisha's letter took second prize, for which she was awarded \$50



"DSS is always telling me I am never going to see you again, but I don't listen to them."

*Name changed to protect confidentiality

Destiny, age 8

Dear Momma,

I feel very, very sad that I can't see you anymore. I hope to see you one day. You are a very good person. I wish that I could toss a coin and I could wish for anything I want. I wish I could be rich and I wish I could have \$100 and I wish I could have a butler. I'd give DSS \$100 and then they could give me back to you and we could all live together again. I hope you will be able to see my brothers again. I miss you very much and I love you.

I wish I could be rich. I'd give DSS \$100 and then they could give me back to you and we could all live together again.

I am a very healthy girl and John and Jane* take care of me. They would never hurt me. I am meeting some new friends at school.

I hope I find a good home when I can be adopted.

When I grow up I want to be a doctor or an author. Love, Destiny

Destiny's letter took third prize, for which she was awarded \$25

*Names changed to protect confidentiality

Alexis, age 15

From "The Letter"

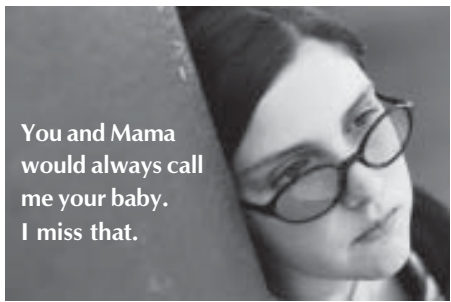
I look up in the stars every night
 Hoping that my future will get bright.
 Then the next day when I look in your face
 You're still tryin' to be the same person
 That I'm tryin' to erase.
 I don't want a fake role model,
 I want a hero.
 Please change back!
 If I can't have a father,
 I don't want a friend.
 If I can't have a dad,
 I don't want an associate.
 Friends and associates fade away
 Into the background
 But a father and a dad
 Stays for life.
 To whom this may concern:
 Give me back my hero.

Alexis received \$15 for having her poem published

Audrey, age 12

Dear Daddy,

I haven't seen you for three years. When I think back on old times, I remember your false teeth and how you looked like a vampire when you would take them out. You would chase us around and act like you were going to bite us, and then you would tickle us. I felt great when you would play with us like that. You and Mama would always call me your baby. I miss that. I don't like thinking about when you went to prison. I hope that someday we can see each other again. I hope that you are happy. I am happy sometimes and not happy sometimes.
 Love, Audrey



You and Mama would always call me your baby. I miss that.

Audrey received \$15 for having her letter published

Desmond, age 18

If I could ask my parent anything I would ask my dad, "Why didn't you love me?" I feel he tossed me away like an old doll. You didn't even play with me. I felt like I came from the sky and that is why I am so sour. . . .You make kids like Ford makes cars. I try to get your attention but I still don't have it. . . . I feel you put others before me when all I ask you for is your time. Time to spend with me. Time to go to a game. I don't want money. I want a dad, a friend. But I guess you still are not ready to face up to your problems. You give men like me a bad name.

I would ask my dad, "Why didn't you love me?"

Desmond received \$15 for having his letter published

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

Disclaimer. The opinions and beliefs expressed herein are not necessarily those of the NC Division of Social Services or the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work.

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Reactions to these letters

Some lessons only children can teach us by Debbie Gallimore

Out of the mouths of babes. As a former foster parent of ten years, these letters represent the reality that I saw in the lives of the children I fostered.

No matter the abuse or the maltreatment, the children always seemed to have a place for their parents in their hearts. It took me several years before I was able to learn this valuable lesson from them. Children love their parents because they are their parents.

Birth parents are more than what they have done. They are the people who gave life to the children we love. They created the color of their eyes, the texture of their hair, and parts of their souls we can never touch.

This was a difficult reality for me to accept. Nothing in MAPP could have prepared me for this life lesson.

What I didn't realize for many years is that the more I accepted and honored the birth families of my foster children, the more the children connected with and loved me. It seemed such a paradox. Yet I came to realize that by honoring and loving their families, I was honoring and loving them, too.

For years I underestimated a child's ability to love more than one mother or more than one father. Once I realized how big a child's heart could be, I started growing mine. I developed wonderful relationships with birth mothers, birth fathers, grandmothers, aunts, and cousins. I learned to genuinely care about them because of who they were to the children that I loved so dearly.

One of the definitions of "foster" is "to promote the devel-

opment of, or cultivate." In many ways the children that my family and I cared for fostered us. We learned to feel frustration and love, sadness and love, and fear and love. Just like the children, we have the capacity to feel different things at the same time.

These letters reminded me of those valuable lessons. No matter the hurt or the betrayal, the human heart has the capacity to love. The longing and void that is created in our children by the loss of their birth families is something we can never fill.

All we can do is love our children.

One way to express that love is to make room in our hearts for

the people who gave such amazing gifts to our world. Look between the words of anger and loss and see the love that's always there. That's where the hope lies—for all of us.

Debbie Gallimore is community outreach coordinator for NC Kids.



Gallimore



by Tim

Tim received \$15 for having his work published

Feelings and the future by Melinda Medina

These letters represent how foster youth feel about their parents. Social workers, foster parents, counselors, and others need to know that these feelings are a reality. Kids really never blame their parents. When kids feel like this the people around them shouldn't discourage them or talk badly about the parent.

If you emotionally support what kids are feeling, show them love, and allow them to be who they want to be and feel what they really feel, the child is going to be a better person, both now and in the future. Who knows? If you sit back and watch the child you might even learn something about yourself.

Nine times out of ten, the more you try to suppress what the child feels about their parents, the more you will hurt the child. Often kids who aren't allowed to deal with these feelings leave foster care at 16 so they can be with their family, even though that isn't the best place for them. Now, if they were able to see their family or talk about them more, maybe these kids would stay in the system, which is usually the best thing for them.

I think counselors, social workers, and foster parents should allow children to write a letter like this at least once a month, even if it isn't mailed to the parents. It would allow kids to get their feelings out.

Melinda Medina is a member of the youth advocacy group SaySo.



Madyson, age 13

Mom,

. . . . Because of you I hover over my food and eat it as fast as I can because I think it will be my last meal. I never feel full, either. I flinch and shield myself when people make fast movements around me. I hate being alone and cannot have my back to any closed door.

The worst is the horrible flashbacks and traumatic nightmares about my past. But I kind of want to say thank-you because it made me so much stronger.

The only thing that stopped me from dying was myself. Without me I wouldn't have survived

You may not think what you put me through was wrong, but I do. You just need to know that I do remember and I'll never forget. But yet after all you put me through for some reason I still love you. I also forgive you.

Sincerely, Madison
PS I hope you love me too!
This is exactly what I would write and also, here's a poem I wrote to her about the way I feel.

Madyson received \$30 for having her letter and her poem published

I Still Love You

Mom, I don't know why
But every time I think of you
I want to cry.
Mom, I can't understand why
I love you so.
Even though your love
Would never show.
I think I did wrong by leaving you.
But Mom, why did you leave me too?
Mom, why do I still believe you're there,
Even though deep inside I know
You don't really care.
Mom, I want you to care
I want you to be there
Guess my dream will never come true
I just want you to know
Mom, I still love you.



North Carolina Foster Parents

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

Association News by Kay Gillis, NCFPA Communications Chair

The North Carolina Foster Parents Association has been busy working to meet the needs of foster, adoptive, and kinship parents across our state.

A prime example of this is what we have done to make it more convenient for you to get the training you need for relicensure. Our one-day conferences in Davidson and Greenville will be history by the time you read this, but save Saturday, February 28, 2004 for the Fayetteville conference. You should also plan to attend our statewide conference in Raleigh/Durham on Saturday-Sunday, April 24-25, 2004. Conference brochures will be at the website <www.ncfpa.org> early in January 2004. The single day conferences allow attendees to earn six hours of training credit. Attend one regional and one statewide conference and complete the training quiz in each issue of *Fostering Perspectives* and you will have earned the 20 hours of training required for re-licensing!

You should also know that the NCFPA was involved in the recent, successful effort to increase North Carolina's foster care board and adoption assistance rates. Thanks to legislative action in July 2003,



Kay Gillis

foster parents and adoptive parents whose children are eligible for adoption assistance now receive \$365 per month for children aged birth through five, \$415 for children aged six through 12, and \$465 for children aged 13 through 18. This increase, the first since 1992, passed in a year when funding cuts were the norm!

The new *ex officio* positions added to the Board are having some exciting impacts. Special thanks to:

- Karen LeClair (Family Support Network) for providing meeting sites and getting our contact information included in thousands of brochures that FSN developed for the state.
- Jeanne Preisler (NC Kids) for enabling us to mail 10,000 conference brochures to foster and adoptive parents, and for providing us with a permanent home.
- Dr. Dana Leinenweber for her efforts to establish a continuum of care for foster children, developing a survey for foster parents to complete, and working to secure grant funding.
- Joanne Scatturo (NCDSS) for her attitude of "anything I can do to help?" and making lovely thank you cards.

New Contact Information

NCFPA now has a permanent mailing address and a toll free number. Those who have not served on the Board may not realize what a huge step this represents! No longer will our contact information change with every change in leadership. Our new phone number is 866-NCFPA-4U (866/623-7248). Our new mailing address is NCFPA at UNCG, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170.

- Frank Byrd (SaySo) for being willing to educate us about issues and concerns of teens in the system.

Do you have ideas or concerns? Let us know! Call our toll free number, write us via snail mail, or use our interactive website <www.ncfpa.org>. Click on the map on the "About Us" page for e-mail addresses.

Please visit our website regularly. New pages on Lifebooks and Local Associations have been added recently, as well as new links to other sites of interest. Look for forums/discussion groups in the near future, as well as a listing of local association contacts. We will also be adding a printable lifebook page each month that you can add to and use in you children's lifebooks. Thanks to Linda Hargrove for her excellent choice of graphics and her dedication to maintaining our site!

Conference ignites family spirit

In June, over 635 foster and adoptive parents from across the state gathered in Greensboro, North Carolina for a conference called *Light the Spark, Ignite the Spirit*. The NC Division of Social Services made this event possible with funds allocated by the General Assembly to commemorate the retirement of Representative Ruth Easterling. During her 25 years in the legislature, Representative Easterling kept the needs of our children foremost in her actions.

NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network was the official coordinator of the event. Together with an advisory board made up of public and private agencies, foster and adoptive parents, and other service organizations, NC Kids created a three-day event that celebrated the achievements of foster and adoptive parents.

North Carolina used this time to thank foster and adoptive parents for all they do for children. Participants selected from over 70 workshops to earn continuing education credits. In a formal ceremony eight foster and adoptive parents from across the state were honored for their strong commitment to our children. The entire weekend was cost free for foster and adop-

tive parents—hotel stays, meals, and reimbursement for respite care expenses were all provided. Families also enjoyed and learned from two great keynote speakers,

George Duvall and Heather Craig-Oldsen.

Families laughed, danced, learned, and networked during this conference.

One participant said, "I cannot begin to tell you how much I have learned and how this will help me to manage the children we bring into our home."

Another summed it up by saying, "I am leaving feeling rejuvenated and inspired. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."



Foster and adoptive parents were all smiles at this workshop during *Light the Spark, Ignite the Spirit*.

Association Update



Periodicals for foster and adoptive parents by Becky Burmester

Regular readers of this column know that I am an avid reader of books in part because I believe I am a better foster parent because of books I have read. I also read periodicals targeted to foster and adoptive parents and believe that these publications can provide us much needed emotional support and knowledge. *The National Advocate*, *Adoptive Families*, *Pact Press*, *Fostering Families TODAY*, *Newsline*, *Practice Notes*, and *Pacesetter* are among the publications I reviewed for this article. I warned my husband that writing this article was going to get expensive. "How so?" he innocently asked. "We don't subscribe to all of these yet." "Oh," he replied.

Newsline is the publication of the North Carolina Foster Parents Association. It is published twice a year and sent to all NCFPA members. Membership is \$15 per person or \$25 per couple. Membership also entitles you to lower registration costs for NCFPA conferences. *Newsline* is created entirely by foster parent volunteers. Each issue has articles on topics of which foster parents in North Carolina need to be aware. *Newsline* and the NCFPA website at <www.ncfpa.org> keep me current on the state of foster care in North Carolina. You will find the membership application on this page. I hope you'll join!

Next on my list of publications is the *National Advocate*, the quarterly publication of the National Foster Parent Association. Membership in the National Association is \$35 per year. You can join online at <www.nfpainc.org> or by calling 800-557-5238. *The National Advocate* is a wonderful publication that addresses foster care concerns of national interest.

Pact Press is a specialized publication addressing issues of race, adoption, and foster care. A one-year subscription is \$32 and is free with family membership. Because we foster transracially, this publication is very important to my family. If you are fostering or adopting across racial lines, I would consider this a "must have" subscription. You can subscribe via the Internet at <www.pactadopt.org> or by phone at 866-722-8257.

Fostering Families TODAY is another quarterly publication. In fact, the complimentary issue that was sent to me for review resulted in this article. The subscription cost is \$16. You can subscribe online at <www.fosteringfamielstoday.com> or by phoning 888-924-6736. If you struggle to accumulate training credits, the quiz at the end of each issue may prove helpful. However, there is a \$5 charge to submit the quiz and receive a certificate of credit. I also liked the "news and views" section that contained brief blurbs of foster care activities and actions, many with places to contact for further information. This is another one to which I really want to subscribe.

Adoptive Families is a bimonthly publication available for \$29.95 a year. The website is <www.adoptivefamilies.com> and the phone number is 800-372-3300. This publication is nearly 30% advertisements, which is in marked contrast to the other publications, which are ad-free. The articles, however, were interesting. "Growing Up Adopted" is a regular feature targeted to specific age groupings addressing child development questions.

Children's Services Practice Notes is another of my favorite publications. John McMahon, editor of *Fostering Perspectives*, also edits this quarterly publication. The target audience is child welfare workers. While foster parents are not paid professionals, we do have an interest in best practices for child welfare. *Practice Notes* is available free online at <www.practicenotes.org>. I find it difficult to read from the computer screen so I print out a copy and take it to bed with me. To receive notification by e-mail whenever a new issue of *Practice Notes* appears online, send an e-mail message to johnmcmahon@mindspring.com with "subscribe" in the subject line.

Do you have a favorite publication that helps meet your needs as a foster or adoptive parent? Please send me information at becky.burmester@mindspring.com or phone me at 919-870-9968. Foster and adoptive parents depend on others for information and support. You can be a vital link. Keep reading!

Becky Burmester is a foster parent and a member of the NC Foster Parents Association.



Becky Burmester

Support Us So We Can Support You!

The mission of the North Carolina Foster Parents Association is to provide you with support and training to help you be the best foster, adoptive, or kinship parent you can be. If you are not already a member, please join today!

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 at UNCC, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170. Make checks payable to the NC FOSTER PARENTS ASSOCIATION.

Regular membership is open to any foster or adoptive parent and is \$15 for an individual and \$25 for a couple. **Associate membership** is \$25 per person and is for anyone who is not a foster or adoptive parent.

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

Last name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

County: _____ Licensing Agency: _____

Home phone: (____) _____ E-mail: _____

Membership Amt. included: _____ Donation Amt.: _____

A reader asks . . .

If you have a question about foster care or adoption 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.

Question: I'm having difficulty with my social worker. I am ready to switch agencies! What should I do?

There are some things you can do to improve your relationship with your social worker. There are also some things to consider before taking the drastic measure of switching agencies.

- 1) **Determine the exact nature of the problem.** Many issues can be addressed by first identifying what you need from your agency, and then articulating those needs to the agency. Many times it is natural to attribute "intent" behind your worker's action (or lack of action) before knowing her side of the situation. For example, if your calls have not been returned, you may fear the worker no longer cares about your family when in fact situations beyond her control prevented her from responding to you.
- 2) **Use the chain of command.** Customer satisfaction is important to all agencies. Agency leadership wants to know what your experience is (good and bad) and your ideas for making it better. When faced with an issue you cannot resolve with your social worker directly, take the issue to this person's immediate supervisor. If necessary, take the matter up with that person's supervisor, and so on. Hopefully, in the end, the issue can be resolved.
- 3) **Make use of the North Carolina's resources.** NC Kids helps the NC Division of Social Services identify and (if possible) resolve obstacles parents face. Should you encounter an obstacle to fostering or adopting, please contact NC Kids toll-free at 1-877-625-4371 and talk to one of our representatives. In cases where you feel you would like the State's opinion and/or intervention, you should call their toll-free CARELINE at 1-800-662-7030.
- 4) **Weigh your decision to switch agencies carefully.** Research the new agency you are considering. The agency may require you to attend its 30-hour training program to become a foster or adoptive parent. You may also experience some of the same obstacles you now face. You may feel like you are starting over.

The one thing to keep in mind when you are having difficulty with your social worker or agency is the question: "What is in the best interest of the children?" Is it in the best interest of the children to rush your assessment, or should the agency take as much time as needed to ensure the child will be placed in a safe, loving family? Is it in the best interest of the child to reduce the number of times social workers visit the children so the workers can spend more time in the office returning phone calls?

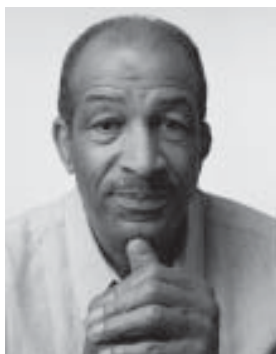
The "business" of adoption and foster care is tough. Patience and communication are required because ensuring the safety, permanence, and well being of children is a complex journey.

Response by Jeanne Preisler, Director, NC Kids.

Question: I grew up in foster care. In fact, I didn't leave care until I was 22, while I was in college. Now I want to go to graduate school, but I am not sure I can manage it financially. Do you know of any scholarships for former foster children interested in graduate school?

There are several things you can do. Your first step should be to contact the independent living coordinator for the state in which you live. For a listing of these coordinators, go to the online version of this issue at <www.fosteringperspectives.org>. You may also wish to visit the website of the Orphan Foundation <www.orphan.org>, which has some wonderful programs to assist youth and former youth. Keep checking their website for scholarships and other assistance. I would also recommend you connect with the Foster Care Alumni site at <<http://fostercarealumni.casey.org/index2.asp>>. You've overcome some amazing obstacles! Keep going—you are a terrific role model for others!

Response by Nancy Carter, Program Coordinator, ILR, Inc.



If you're having trouble, ask yourself: "What's in the best interest of the kids?"

Get in-service training credit for reading this newsletter!

Enjoy reading *Fostering Perspectives* and earn credit toward your relicensure. Just write down the answers to the questions below and present them to your social worker. If your answers are satisfactory, you'll receive 30 minutes of credit toward your 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.

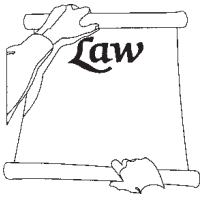
In-Service Quiz, FP v8# 1

1. What two groups adopt the majority of children from foster care, and how many foster children in North Carolina are currently waiting to be adopted?
2. What kind of car does Virginia want to drive when she grows up?
3. Name three things you can do to help an at-risk student survive middle school.
4. What is the Multiple Response System?
5. What amendment to the Constitution did the Stumbos invoke in their appeal to the N.C. Supreme Court?
6. Who is Ruth Easterling?
7. Nationally, what percentage of youths transitioning out of foster care enter college?
8. When can North Carolina foster parents next become certified to teach MAPP/GPS?
9. Name three things that Melinda Medina did while she was in high school.
10. *Fostering Perspectives* sponsors art and writing contests for foster children that feature cash awards for contest winners. What is the theme for the next writing contest?

Correction

The May 2003 issue contained an error in the section "Tax Update." It should have stated that for adoptions of children with special needs finalized after 12/31/2002 (i.e., in tax year 2003), there is a flat tax credit of \$10,000 **WITHOUT** the need to document expenses. Of course, to claim this credit the child must meet the criteria for "special needs" as defined by the IRS. For further information see IRS publication 968 "Tax Benefits for Adoption" <www.irs.gov>

Special thanks to reader Cindy Adams, a tax accountant, for this correction



The *Stumbo* Ruling and CPS Investigations

By John McMahon

When the North Carolina Supreme Court chose to hear the matter of *Stumbo*

many believed the case would have far-reaching implications for our state's child protective services workers. Child advocates hoped the court would use the case to reaffirm the role of child welfare agencies and the methods they use to protect children from abuse and neglect. Civil libertarians and home schoolers hoped for a decision that would advance and protect parental rights. In the end, neither side got exactly what it wanted.

The *Stumbo* case began in September 1999, when the Cleveland County Department of Social Services (DSS) received an anonymous report that Jim and Mary Ann *Stumbo's* two-year-old daughter was wandering in the driveway of their house, naked and unsupervised.

Soon after, a child protective services (CPS) worker arrived at the family's home to look into the report and assess the child's safety. When the *Stumbos* refused to allow the social worker to interview their children in private, DSS filed a petition with a court alleging that the parents were obstructing and interfering with the CPS investigation. The court agreed.

The *Stumbos*, who home school their children, appealed the decision with the assistance of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). In a divided decision, the North Carolina Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's ruling.

The *Stumbos* again appealed, this time to the North Carolina Supreme Court, which heard the case in February 2002. Lawyers for Cleveland County DSS argued before the NC Supreme Court that CPS workers were in compliance with the law in their efforts to investigate this report of neglect. The *Stumbos* and their supporters—including the American Civil Liberties Union—disagreed, arguing that because social workers are agents of the government, their demands to interview the *Stumbo* children amounted to an unreasonable search and seizure, in violation of the Fourth Amendment.

After an uncharacteristically long delay, on July 16, 2003 the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of the *Stumbos*, though in a way that sidestepped the

Fourth Amendment issue. In the majority opinion Justice Robert Orr stated that although the *Stumbos'* child did slip out of the house without their awareness, this kind of parental lapse "does not in and of itself constitute 'neglect.'" The Court ruled that Cleveland County DSS was in error when it accepted the report for investigation because this report failed to meet the legal definition of neglect as defined by North Carolina statute § 7B-101. As an aside, the Court stated that if there had been a complaint of a pattern of lack of supervision of the child or other credible evidence that indicated a serious failing on the part of the parents to look after the child, the report would have merited investigation.

Though the family's supporters trumpeted the decision as a victory for parental rights, it does not call into question the legal basis of DSS procedures. Asked to comment about the case, Kirk Randleman, Assistant Attorney General with the N.C. Department of Justice, said, "Agencies should not change the way they operate as a result of this ruling. They should continue to use the legal definitions and the information they have about the level of risk to the child when deciding whether or not to investigate."

However, the *Stumbo* decision does have implications for the way child welfare agencies ask courts for noninterference orders when they feel parents are obstructing CPS investigations. According to a summary on *Stumbo* prepared by Randleman and his colleagues in the Attorney General's office, when agencies petition the court in these situations they must first present sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the initial report meets the legal definition of abuse/neglect. Only after they have satisfied a judge on this point can they present evidence about parental interference.

Stumbo also sends the message that agencies must carefully screen child maltreatment reports to ensure they meet North Carolina's definition of abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Recent developments in child welfare practice in North Carolina may make this easier for county child protection agencies.

Though trumpeted as a victory for parental rights, the decision does not call into question the legal basis of CPS investigations.

As of June 1, 2003, every DSS in the state began using a new **strengths-based, structured intake process** designed to ensure child maltreatment reports are screened in a consistent way and that agencies get better information from reporters about families and their

situations. The tools in this highly structured process emphasize learning about family strengths as well as needs, so that if they do need to intervene, agencies are better prepared to support families and protect children. These new screening tools can be found online at <<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/childrenservices/forms/DSS-1408.doc>>.

The summary from the Attorney General's office also urges county DSS's to be aware of, place more emphasis upon, and comply with GS § 7B-302(h), which was passed into law on July 4, 2003. This law, which addresses Fourth Amendment issues implicit in CPS visits, reads:

(h) The director or the director's representative may not enter a private residence for investigation purposes without at least one of the following:

- (1) The reasonable belief that a juvenile is in imminent danger of death or serious physical injury
- (2) The permission of the parent or person responsible for the juvenile's care
- (3) The accompaniment of a law enforcement officer who has legal authority to enter the residence
- (4) An order from a court of competent jurisdiction

To Learn More

- NC Supreme Court's Ruling in the Matter of *Stumbo* <<http://www.aoc.state.nc.us/www/public/sc/opinions/2003/321-01-1.htm>>
- Summary of *Stumbo* prepared by Attorney General's office for the NC Division of Social Services, visit this issue of the newsletter at <<http://www.fosteringperspectives.org>>

The power of shared parenting

by John McMahon

Bridget Emperor thinks too few foster parents realize how important and powerful they are. When she talks about power, the Buncombe County foster parent is thinking not only of foster parents' capacity to nurture children, but about what they can do for families.

"Foster parents can bring birth families up or they can bring them down," she says. "You may feel like low man on the totem pole in terms of the child welfare system, but you have a great deal of influence over what happens to these families."

The Shared Parenting Perspective
Emperor is a proponent of "shared parenting," a practice in which social workers bring foster and birth parents together during a child's first week in foster care. The aim of shared parenting is to promote ongoing, positive interactions between birth parents and foster parents so that birth parents can be active members of the alliance focused on the welfare of their child.

Bridget learned about shared parenting because her county department of social services (DSS) is involved in a reform effort called the Multiple Response System (MRS). This effort calls upon North Carolina county DSS's to use shared parenting and six other strategies to improve services to children and their families. MRS's strategies will become the standard of child welfare practice in all 100 county DSS's in 2005.

"The Best Way to Start"

In Emperor's experience, the shared parenting approach is the best way to start a foster child's placement.

"With my former foster son, whom we eventually adopted, we didn't meet his

birth mother until he had been in our home for three months. In retrospect, not having contact with the birth mother made things much harder."

With another child, Emperor had contact with the birth family from the beginning. The child was placed in foster care at birth, but because of complications he was in the neonatal intensive care unit for a long time, and then in a "step-down" unit as he recovered.

During this time Bridget met the child's mother. "We spent many hours together for four days straight while he was in the hospital," she says.

With that foundation, it was easy to make regular contact a standard part of caring for this child. Indeed, Bridget was comfortable enough to share her phone number with the mother so she could call to check on her child.

Given the strength of this relationship and the extremely low risk to the child, DSS even allowed Bridget to schedule visitations; she and the birth mother would arrange the visit and then Bridget would call DSS to inform them of the plan.

There Are Exceptions

Bridget says there are limits to when the shared parenting approach can be used. She readily acknowledges that it will not work with all families. "I've known parents I would never want to have my phone number or my address," she says.

The key, she says, is the emotional state of the birth parents: Emperor's DSS has made it very clear that if the birth parents

"You may feel like low man on the totem pole in the child welfare system, but you have a great deal of influence over what happens to these families."

have a recent history of violence or there is a potential for violence, there will be no shared parenting meeting.

"Yet even if regular contact is not possible," Bridget says, "I always send photographs of the

children to their parents."

Maintaining the Parent/Child Bond

Like other foster parents and social workers who've embraced shared parenting, Bridget understands that regardless of what birth parents have done, they care deeply about their children.

"As a foster parent, my job is both to advocate for the child and to help birth parents change and be reunited with their children," she says.

To help get this message across to new and prospective foster parents, Bridget participates as a speaker during the "panel nights" offered as part of her agency's MAPP training. "I tell prospective families, 'The bottom line is, this is not your child.' That's where a lot of people have a hard time. Yet it is the most basic point if we are to succeed as foster parents."

At some point, Bridget says, foster parents must consciously release control. When it comes to parenting decisions, "if the birth parent wants me to do it a particular way, then for the good of the child that's the way I need to do it."

Emperor admits that letting go can be hard. She recalls one time when a child had a cold on a day when he was scheduled to visit with his mother. In her heart of hearts, Emperor wanted to postpone the visit until the child was feeling better.

She knew, however, that the child was well enough for a visit. On an intellectual level she understood that the parent deserved to see her child, and the child needed to see his mother.

But on an emotional level? "At first, you have to make a very conscious effort."

Yet the effort is worth it. As Bridget says, "With shared parenting, you can be the key to successful family reunification."

MRS in Brief

What Is MRS?

It is the Multiple Response System, an effort to make child welfare services in North Carolina more family-centered, consistent, and effective. In MRS, county DSS's focus on these key strategies:

The Seven Strategies of MRS

1. Strengths-based, structured intake process
2. Choice of two approaches to reports of child abuse, neglect, or dependency
3. Coordination between law enforcement agencies and child protective services for the investigative assessment approach
4. Redesign of in-home family services
5. Child and family team meetings*
6. Shared parenting meetings*
7. Collaboration between Work First and child welfare programs

*Involve foster parents most directly

The 51 MRS Counties

Since August 2002: Alamance, Bladen, Buncombe, Caldwell, Craven, Franklin, Guilford, Mecklenburg, Nash, and Transylvania

Since September 2003: Alexander, Ashe, Brunswick, Caswell, Catawba, Chatham, Cherokee, Clay, Cleveland, Currituck, Davidson, Davie, Duplin, Durham, Gates, Graham, Halifax, Harnett, Haywood, Henderson, Iredell, Jackson, Johnston, Lee, Lincoln, Macon, Martin, Moore, New Hanover, Orange, Pasquotank, Person, Polk, Scotland, Swain, Union, Wake, Warren, Watauga, Wilson, Yancey

Not yet part of MRS: All other counties. MRS will be the standard in child welfare in all counties in 2005.

To Learn More, Look Online

<<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/childrenservices/mrs/index.htm>>

Thoughts on faith and foster care by Elizabeth Cassedy



Elizabeth Cassedy

My husband and I attend church on Sundays. When we were thinking of becoming foster parents, we joked with our minister that it seemed that every Sunday the sermon was directed at us, that we were supposed to be doing something of service.

I had learned through the years that all the successful families I worked with had a strong belief system that supported them in their foster parenting. Foster parents had always talked to me about the importance of their faith and of going to church for their families and for their foster children. It's a topic that we had always dealt with on a peripheral level in MAPP class: "Yes, you can do this IF the birth family has the same belief system, and IF the birth family consents."

My perspective on this issue has changed since I became a foster parent. Now I think it's time we opened a dialogue

about the role of faith and belief. I think of God as the elephant in the room we can no longer ignore.

Church and the rituals fascinated my children. They were so perfect when they first attended. Thankfully their behavior has changed. Now they act like the other kids. They complain, "It's boring!" My answer is, "Get over it. This is what we do."

Our church community has been respectful and unintrusive. Our children have been welcomed, and no questions were asked about their past experiences.

Why do I believe in the importance of the church community and the lessons learned in Sunday school? Because I believe we need all the help we can get to teach our children. We can't do this alone. Do our schools teach children to be caring

and respectful, to think of others? Do they learn in school to care for their friends, to be honest and kind and forgiv-

ing and to not react in anger?

It's not the role of the school to teach these lessons, it's the role of the family, and our children have had

life experiences where they may not have learned these lessons from their families. Our church community can help us to help our children.

Living in the South, there's not the diversity of religions that families in other parts of the country experience. While I firmly believe we need to be respectful of one another's beliefs, we must also find common ground to give our children the positive values that all faith communities teach.

Elizabeth Cassedy is a licensing social worker for Chatham County DSS. She and her husband are also foster parents for Orange County, North Carolina.

Letting go the first time By Michelle Ziner

My husband and I and our four biological children eagerly awaited the call for our first foster placement. We had requested a child younger than our 6-year-old so as not to upset our sibling balance.

One day a beautiful 3-year-old boy arrived with huge blue eyes. He had a curious look on his face, as if he were wondering, "Who is this family? Why am I here?"

Oh, how our MAPP training echoed in the back of my mind. "This child has been removed from his security, his connections," our leader taught. How were we to fill that void? Where do we begin? Losses and attachment were always the difficult questions for me to ponder after each MAPP class. I could nurture, I could care, I could love with all my heart, but could I let go? This question was listed repeatedly on homework as my greatest need.

None of us comes equipped with all the tools we need to foster. We all have weaknesses. Yet we cannot be afraid to forge ahead, even though we know we will come face to face with our weaknesses somewhere down the road.

Our family attached easily and quickly to this little boy. At the same time, I tried to prepare myself for the day he would leave.

That day came only one short month after he arrived. I guess I needed my training quickly! I was told he was going to live with his grandmother.

As I packed his clothes and toys the void began to set in. I thought, "This is not natural. I don't think God ever meant for families to separate." Helplessness overcame me. No training can equip a loving human being to let go of an innocent, dependent child. At that moment I poured my heart out to God requesting grace for this situation. Grace is a free gift and the only way to cope with the emotions I was feeling.

When the social worker and the grandmother arrived I called out for one more dose of grace, put a smile on my face, and opened the door. The little boy ran to his grandmother and hugged her. He looked exactly like her.

As he climbed into her car, he waved goodbye. I kissed him and asked his favorite question: "Who loves you, Babe?" He replied with a precious smile: "You do!"

As they drove away, I wiped away my tears and felt I had served him. I thanked God for the strength to overcome my greatest weakness: saying goodbye. I pray that I will be able to do it again.

Michelle and her family are currently caring for a 10-month-old baby boy, to whom they are very close.

Home Fire Prevention

Use this checklist to help keep your family safe.

- Is your stove top clean and free of clutter?
- Are your counter-top appliances (cords too) in good repair?
- Do you have adequate electrical circuits for heat-producing appliances?
- Are wall receptacle outlets protected by ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) in areas such as bathrooms, garages, kitchens, outdoors, and basements?
- Are your portable fire extinguishers fully charged?
- If you have a fireplace, does it have a screen to catch sparks?
- Are space and portable heaters at least three feet away from walls and anything else that can burn?
- If anyone smokes in your home, do you have large, deep, non-tip ashtrays?
- Are matches and lighters locked away up high, out of children's reach?
- Are your fuses and circuit breakers rated higher than the ampacity (rated capacity) of the wires connected to them?
- Has your heating system been serviced professionally in the past 12 months?
- Has your chimney been inspected or cleaned in the past 12 months?
- Do you have smoke alarms installed on every level of your home?
- Have you tested your smoke alarms recently to ensure they work?
- Have you considered installing an automatic home fire sprinkler system in your home?
- Are any smoke alarms in your home more than 10 years old? If so, replace them.

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SaySo: Changing the profile of foster youth

by Nancy Carter

In past years when I asked the current and former foster youth who make up the Board of Directors of SaySo if they were going to college, the answers weren't good. I'd hear them say, "I wish!" "It's not happening this year," and "I was supposed to be going but...."

The youth of SaySo are beating the odds, overcoming obstacles, and finding strength in each other.

This year was different. I found that 32% of the board members at our summer 2003 meeting were in high school or completing a GED. The other 68% (16 kids) had been accepted to and were planning on attending college.

College? National statistics indicate 13% of youths transitioning out of foster care enter college, compared to the 60-70% of the overall population of high school graduates.

After the initial shock—the kids were as surprised as I was—we began to ask ourselves, "Wow, what's going on here?"

In the Beginning

SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out) debuted in 1998 through a collaboration between the NC Child Advocacy Institute and Independent Living Resources, Inc. Funding through a Kellogg Foundation grant provided the impetus for the "NC Foster Youth Association."

The name quickly changed because youth attending the first meeting were empowered to develop the structure, rules, membership criteria, and overall purpose of the organization. We watched as, for the first time in North Carolina, an organization was created by young people for young people. It was amazing! It took time to develop an organization where young people believed they could be heard and—in partnership with adults—create needed solutions and develop exciting programs. It took time, but it happened.

This group continues today as SaySo, Inc., which officially incorporated as a non-profit in March 2003. It is currently funded by the NC LINKS Program and coordinated by Independent Living Resources, Inc.

Accomplishments

Despite obstacles, SaySo has created a network to empower youth through leadership, advocacy, education, and support. SaySo holds a statewide conference (first Saturday of each March) called "SaySo Saturday" where members choose the organization's board of directors. Other activities include public speaking, coopera-

tive trainings (with Guardians ad Litem, social workers, foster parents, and legal representatives), public service announcements for foster/adoptive parent recruitment, and life skills conferences. While SaySo's board maintains an active statewide presence, the

SaySo chapters in Moore, Caldwell, Mecklenburg, Wake, Guilford, and Cumberland Counties are more involved in local initiatives. SaySo has 173 general members, representing only 8% of the North Carolina foster youths aged 14 and older.

The Secret of SaySo

Over the years some things have changed. Others remain the same. SaySo continues to attract young people from all over the state to be on its board of directors. Despite the variety of their substitute care experiences, SaySo members are united by a common desire to support foster youths and to fulfill the SaySo mission: to improve the substitute care system by educating the community, speaking out about needed changes, and providing support to youth that are or have been in substitute care.

This mission—and the activities that support it—are influencing the mindset of SaySo youths. They are beating the odds, overcoming obstacles, and finding strength in their peer relationships. Not only are they surviving, they are **thriving**. SaySo youths feel empowered to make a difference, see possibilities instead of pitfalls, control their destiny, and want positive outcomes for themselves and others. They are changing the stigma associated with foster care!

Peer support and teamwork are powerful tools. As one young woman put it, "We're like family to each other. We celebrate together and we help each other in bad times, too."

Why were we surprised to see so many young people staying in school and going to college? Maybe we had forgotten that when young people have the opportunity, support, and guidance to do good things...they do great things!

Nancy Carter is the Program Coordinator for Independent Living Resources, Inc. She says, "Promoting higher education for foster youths will no doubt continue as federal education vouchers are instituted. Look for more on this topic in future issues of Fostering Perspectives and the SaySo Newsletter: Having Our Say."

NC Woman Named "Youth of the Year"

Melinda Medina, a former foster youth from Gaston County, has been named "Youth of the Year" by the National Independent Living Association (NILA).



Melinda Medina

In an awards ceremony in Orlando, Florida on August 14, NILA celebrated Melinda's independence, determination, and unwavering commitment to improving the lives of foster youth.

NILA praised Medina, a founding member of the group SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out), for successfully bringing the concerns of youth in care to the attention of North Carolina's leaders and for inspiring other young people to speak out. The ceremony also honored her for providing an example of steadfast self-confidence in the unpredictable world of foster care, and for being someone who focuses on solutions, not problems.

Medina graduated high school on schedule—with honors—while raising two toddlers. While in school she worked full time, earned a college scholarship, and attended court hearings for her six younger siblings. She left foster care at age 19 and has been on her own for two years.

Now 21, Melinda has graduated from community college, works full-time, and is the mother of three daughters. She intends to pursue a career in human services. She is also interested in becoming a Guardian ad Litem.

Melinda is living proof that youth involvement can create positive changes in the foster care system. Melinda is full of life and fire. She's someone who will never give up. We're proud of you, Melinda!

Join SaySo!

To start a local chapter, become a SaySo member or sponsor, or to receive a complete listing of SaySo activities, contact sayso@ilrinc.com, 800-820-0001, or visit our website <http://nc-sayso.tripod.com>.

Foster Parents as MAPP/GPS Trainers

by John McMahon

When you're thinking about buying a particular type of car, you talk to people you know and trust who own that type of car. They can tell you about the car's strong points and weaknesses based on their personal experience, not on what it says in the manual or in some online review. Honest testimony from someone who's been there is one of the best ways to make such an important decision.

This is even truer when you're contemplating taking the life-changing step of becoming a foster or adoptive parent. In fact, that's why the Child Welfare Institute, which developed MAPP/GPS (the curriculum North Carolina uses to prepare foster and adoptive parents), strongly recommends this course be co-taught by a foster parent and an agency representative.

Up until recently, however, courses for our state's prospective foster and adoptive parents have been taught almost exclusively by DSS social workers. In most cases, MAPP trainees got to speak with and meet foster and adoptive parents during just a few of the course's 30 training hours. The primary reason for this was that to co-lead MAPP, foster parents had to at-

tend a certification course held on weekdays during working hours. These times just don't work for most foster parents.

To fix the problem, the NC Division of Social Services now offers a MAPP certification course for foster parents that takes place in seven days clustered around two weekends. The course is offered on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of one week and then on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday approximately two weeks later. It is hoped that this schedule will enable foster parents to attend the course without having to take too much time off work.

The new course worked for Miles Hamrick. An adoptive and foster parent with the Charlotte-based agency Another Choice for Black Children, Mr. Hamrick was certified to co-lead MAPP at the end of February 2003. Since then he's taught two sections of MAPP, both of which he found very rewarding.

"I enjoy helping people learn about what it's like to be a foster and an adoptive parent," he says. Mr. Hamrick says the hardest thing about teaching MAPP is remembering all of the content in the course, but "it's wonderful to be able to answer

their questions and to see their expressions and hear their feedback after class."

To foster and adoptive parents thinking about becoming certified to teach MAPP Mr. Hamrick says, "If you have the time, you won't regret it. It's a wonderful chance to spread your love and your knowledge."

This course helps foster parents hone their training and presentation skills in addition to preparing them to teach on topics related to foster care and adoption.

The course will be offered next on January 8-11 and 23-25, 2004 in the Raleigh area. There is no registration fee, although participants or the agency sponsoring them must pay for hotel, travel, and food expenses. To attend this course you must have at least two years experience as a foster parent. For more information or to register, contact Clarence Lamb of the NCDSS Staff Development Team (919/733-7672).

"It's a wonderful chance to spread your love and your knowledge."

—Miles Hamrick

Respite

by Meg Youravish

Respite was a word I knew nothing about in my beginning years of foster and adoptive parenting. I had heard the word but never cared to understand it, since it seemed to have something to do with "time for me" and "someone else watching my children." I thought that no one could handle my children except for me. After all, they are special needs children. I was their parent, friend, counselor, and caretaker. What a wonderful thought.

When I was finally exhausted, emotionally drained, and dreaming of monster poopie diapers and children throwing rages and tantrums running down a long, long, narrow hallway after me yelling "Mommie, Mommie, more!" and found myself waking up with sweat pounding on my forehead, I decided to learn more about "Respite."

Now, nine years (with seven years of using respite) later, I have had a chance to look forward and make plans for the future. Our respite needs vary; it could be once a week, once a month, and/or a big one once a year. I used to feel guilty about using respite until I realized my children are much different with other people. I came to realize they need a respite, too.

I have grown used to the idea that once seemed so impossible to me: there are actually other adults who can care for my children and who enjoy them. There are two ways that my family has developed to cover respite expenses. One way was to set a rate with the provider or friend. The average charged by care providers we used and what I charged when we did respite care was \$25 per 24 hours per child. Well, as my family grew it was an expensive respite option. So I found a friend who enjoys trading respite care. My children go to her, and then her children come over to our house.

At first it was overwhelming, but we eventually adjusted. Now I LOVE respite. You actually feel human again with a little "time off" for everyone. Summertime is an important time to consider respite care. The children enjoy going to someone else's house for a campout and a different environment.

A good phrase to keep in mind when it comes to respite is "use it or lose it!!"

Meg Youravish is an adoptive parent from California.

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Respite Resources in North Carolina

- Contact your licensing social worker. Some counties have funding for respite that goes unused due to lack of demand.
- Visit the ARCH National Resource Center for Respite and Crisis Care <<http://www.archrespite.org/>>, which exists to support respite providers and the families they serve. They do not provide respite services themselves, but they are an excellent source of information (800/473-1727). Try their respite locator service at <<http://www.respitelocator.org/n6states.htm>>.



Photo Illustration

Thinking of caring for a child with special needs?

New Information from the Family Support Network of NC and the NC Division of Social Services

by Karen LeClair



The Family Support Network of North Carolina is delighted to announce a series of pamphlets and a new video designed to increase awareness and provide information about resources available to people who become foster or adoptive parents.

In 2002, the state's General Assembly appropriated funds for projects to benefit foster and adoptive parents caring for children with special needs. They set these funds aside to commemorate the retirement of Representative Ruth Easterling, a champion of children's issues in the NC House for more than 25 years.

With the support provided through this measure, the Family Support Network of North Carolina has developed a series of pamphlets entitled, "So You're Thinking of Caring for a Child with Special Needs." The

pamphlets provide useful information to parents seeking to foster or adopt children with special needs. The pamphlets address fostering or adopting:

- Adolescents
- Children with medical issues
- Transracially
- Children with mental health, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges

The pamphlets include an introduction from Sheryl Ewing, President of the North Carolina Foster Parents Association. They also provide contact information for state and national organizations that assist foster and adoptive families.

In addition to the pamphlets, Family Support Network has worked with Advanced Medical Productions to develop *So You're Thinking of Caring for a Child with Special Needs*, a

video that highlights the joys and challenges of foster parenting children with special needs. The video enables viewers to meet foster and adoptive families and hear from children and families themselves about their experiences.

The video was created by Advanced Medical Productions, based in Chapel Hill. They have created a moving portrayal of the real issues that foster and adoptive families confront daily, while showing how deeply meaningful foster parenting can be. Kathryn Kramer, Project Coordinator, has worked with the production crew at Advanced Medical to capture the real difference a loving home can make for a child.

The pamphlets and video are published through collaboration between Family Support Network of North Carolina and

the NC Division of Social Services as a part of their efforts to support birth parents, foster and adoptive parents, grandparents and other kin, and legal guardians who care for infants who are medically fragile and children who have special needs. A kick-off event and preview is planned in connection with Adoption Awareness Month activities, although a date and time for this event have yet to be announced.

The pamphlets and video will be available across the state for training. For further information, please call the Family Support Network at 800/852-0042, visit <www.fsnn.org>, or contact NC KIDS (e: nckids@uncg.edu; t: 877/625-4371).

Karen LeClair is the Foster Families Project Coordinator with the FSN-NC.

Get Your Kids First License Plate Today!

The next time you renew your license plate, consider applying for a whole new tag—a "Kids First" license tag. Ordering the Kids First license plate offers you a visible way to show your support of North Carolina's children. The license plate can be ordered at any time or when you renew your automobile license plate. This specialized license plate was developed to benefit the North Carolina Children's Trust Fund. Fifteen dollars of the \$25 fee goes directly to the Children's Trust Fund.

These funds are used to provide grants to programs relating to child abuse prevention activities. Numerous child advocacy efforts, statewide and local nonprofit organizations, and direct-service agencies depend on these funds to help stop child abuse and neglect. The \$25 fee is an annual fee due in addition to the regular license fee. To order, call the NC Dept. of Motor Vehicles Specialized License Plates Division at 919/861-3575. Order forms are also available at local DMV offices and online at <<http://www.dmv.dot.state.nc.us>>.



Nationally, Foster Parents and Relatives Adopt Majority of Children with Special Needs

A June 2003 research brief from the Urban Institute outlines characteristics of parents who adopt children from the foster care system. The report, *Who Will Adopt the Foster Care Children Left Behind?*, found foster parents and relatives were more likely than the general population to adopt waiting children. The information in the brief may offer clues to help States further hone their recruitment efforts. Some of the other findings include:

- Foster parent adoptions accounted for 56% of the children adopted from foster care in fiscal year (FY) 1999.
- Relative adoptions accounted for 20% of foster care adoptions in FY 1999. Relatives also cared for an additional 24,000 children in the foster care system.
- Foster parents were found to be similar to general applicants in terms of age, marital status, and race. Relative adopters, however, were found to be significantly older and less likely to be married than foster parents or general applicants.
- Relatives (not surprisingly) were more similar in race and ethnicity to the children they adopted than were foster parents or general applicants.
- Adoptions by general applicants were more likely to be transracial than foster-parent adoptions.
- The children in foster care waiting for adoptive families tend to be closest in characteristics to the children adopted by relatives (older, male, and Black). Children who are adopted from foster care are younger and more likely to be female, Caucasian, and Hispanic.

The author notes that because Black parents already adopt foster children at a rate double their proportion in the population, it might be unrealistic to expect to identify enough Black families for the children still waiting for homes. He suggests agencies may be able to increase the number of children adopted from foster care by dismantling barriers to relative adoption, encouraging foster parenting as a precursor to adoption, and helping families overcome challenges involved in transracial and special needs adoptions.

The full report is available at <<http://www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=8465>>.

Reprinted from the Children's Bureau Express (September 2003). Online <<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>>

More than 600 North Carolina children await adoption



Justin



Jamie



Sharon



Natacha



Tayfon



Virginia



Ashley



Aaron



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

November is National Adoption Awareness Month, a time to think about the more than 600 children in North Carolina who are free for adoption. These children long for parents who can give them a forever family. Here's your chance to learn about a few of these wonderful children.

JUSTIN (age 15)

Justin's beautiful smile and good sense of humor make him pleasant to be around. He enjoys being outdoors camping, playing basketball, or riding his bike. Justin likes to play soccer and swimming is his favorite summertime activity. He has just recently learned to play football and likes it very much. Justin is inquisitive and likes to learn new things. He is proud of having won a science award a couple of years ago. (NC #099-360)

SHARON (age 12)

Sharon is a happy, easygoing girl who enjoys playing with her Barbie dolls, eating pepperoni pizza and riding her bike. Coloring, watching TV, and playing ball are other activities that keep her busy. She likes going to church and listening to the church choir. Her foster mom says Sharon likes wearing lip-gloss, dressing up, and fixing her hair. She follows family rules well and is loving and affectionate with her foster family. (NC #092-730)

TAYFON (age 15)

Tayfon is an outgoing and friendly young man who never meets a stranger and never forgets a face. He is charming and affectionate and enjoys praise and hugs. Tayfon is very good at sports and enjoys playing football and basketball. He also likes playing video games, X-Box, and going to church. Moving into a traditional school was a great accomplishment for Tayfon and he is very proud of his progress. (NC #051-238)

ASHLEY (age 17)

Ashley is a lovely, free-spirited, caring girl. She would rather read quietly, listen to music, or watch movies than participate in many activities, although she says she would like to play on a softball team. Ashley is an intelligent young woman who says she'd like to be an interior decorator when she graduates from high school. Her adoptive family should be patient, loving, and nurturing as they help Ashley through the trying teenage years. (NC #059-1927)

JAMIE (age 8)

Jamie is a beautiful, sweet, active little girl. She has wonderful manners and is delightful to be around. She gets along very well with adults and children her age or younger. There is a great deal of creativity in this young lady and she thinks she'd like to use it in a career as an artist. Jamie enjoys watching movies, going to the beach, and playing with her Barbie doll. (NC #041-979)

NATACHA (age 13)

Natacha has a beautiful smile and sparkling brown eyes. She loves music and dancing, cheerleading, swimming, and gymnastics. She is a lively girl who likes to be on the go, participating in fun activities. Natacha would like to learn to draw and paint. Chinese food is her favorite, but she eats just about anything except liver and catfish. Natacha would do well with either a single mom or a stable married couple. (NC #018-1904)

VIRGINIA (age 8)

Virginia's foster mom says her favorite thing about this girl is her excitement about life and the smallest things. She enjoys joining in social activities, she shares well, and is quite generous with people she likes. Virginia has a terrific memory. Her loves to do anything that involves counting or solving puzzles. She's not sure yet what she wants to be when she grows up, but she does know that she wants to drive a white Cadillac. (NC #065-1874)

AARON (age 11)

Aaron is an affectionate boy who likes to sit near his foster mom. He enjoys playing basketball, jumping on the trampoline and being outdoors. Aaron also likes to play simple board games, build things with his Lego set, and play computer games. He has no problem playing by himself. Aaron requires a great deal of attention, so a two-parent family is essential. He is used to having other children in the home. (NC #076-192)

How to help at-risk students survive middle school by Susan Pepper

The social studies assignment required students to make a timeline of the most important years in their lives. The eighth grader was hanging back from lunch, holding up his sagging pants in one hand, the timeline in the other. He proceeded to point out the two most important years in his life. He whispered, "This is the year my father died, and this is the year my mother died." I asked about his current living arrangements; he lived with his aunt. His brother was serving five years in prison.

The realization was stark: Do the parts of speech or the causes of the Civil War really matter to this young man? Not at all. Is a quality education important to his future? Absolutely—in some ways, perhaps more so than for those living in stable situations. The question for those who work with at-risk children is how to make education a focus for them when they are concerned primarily with survival.

Whether their at-risk situation is caused by family upheaval, transience, abuse, poverty, or other factors, the challenge for these students is the same. A set of strategies must be in place so these students can focus more on education and less on personal survival. The middle school years are critical—often making or breaking students. By following a few simple steps, you can improve an at-risk student's chances for success through these trying years.

1. **Identify a point person.** Contact the educator who has the most positive rapport with this student, and let that person know immediately of the challenges facing the child. Ask this educator for help in working through any rough spots. If one teacher on the team is sold on this student's potential, she can spread the word to the whole team and suggest positive strategies when he is having a tough day. Secondary school teachers may have as many as 150 students. It's critical to get this student on their radar immediately.
2. **Establish a dialogue with the guidance department.** Ask about programs and services such as anger management. Notify the student's counselor of any upcoming changes so her teachers remain informed. One of our students did quite well until her drug-addicted mother would make a periodic visit. The student would start coming to school wearing heavy makeup and telling everyone she was moving away with her mom.
3. **Get a clear game plan on attendance.** Nothing sinks students faster than a high absentee rate. Students have to



You can improve an at-risk student's chances for academic success.

get into the pattern of attending school every day. Obviously, if they are absent, they have missed the teachers' lesson plans for the day. At-risk students become frustrated at being behind and then face a mountain of makeup work. Many students simply give up. Work with your point person to find a solution. Can the student have an extension? Can he do some of the work during lunch or before school? Is all of the work essential? Work out a viable solution.

4. **Negotiate in-school suspension for discipline whenever possible.** Most schools use primarily in-school and out-of-school suspension for discipline. Sometimes, in-school suspension will not work, such as cases involving fighting or drugs. For lesser infringements, however, push hard for the student to remain in the classroom. Would an apology to a teacher be feasible? How about silent lunch? Success occurs when students are in the classroom participating in learning. Removing these students from their academic routine often leads to frustration and failure.
5. **Use a daily agenda book for assignments and communication.** Agendas are useful for building a positive school routine. Consistency is critical to maintaining academic focus. Get into a routine of checking the student's agenda for homework. If necessary, ask the teachers to double-check and initial the agenda to be certain the necessary information is there. In addition to bolstering grades, this daily exercise in organization gives students a sense of control over the academic process and helps build confidence. Agendas are also a great communication tool between home and school, since concerns can be quickly addressed through short notes.
6. **Find an organizational system that works.** An agenda book is inconsequential if it's buried in a 50-pound backpack. In my experience, the best system for students with weak organizational skills is a colored folder system. A red folder for science is easily found in the bottom of a locker. A black folder can be for their most dreaded class. Make it simple and memorable. Often, a student's entire day is ruined because she cannot find an assignment she worked hard to complete. If the pattern is repeated, students begin to shut down in class, believing the situation is now hopeless.

Academic success is so important for at-risk students, but they frequently lack the skills to do well. Confidence rises when they are able to accomplish what is expected of them. The middle school years are tough on most students, but they are especially difficult for students who are just barely surviving on many levels. These strategies and others provide tools for academic success—they do not address the other pressures in their lives. But academic success often equals hope for the future, something many at-risk students can definitely use.

Susan Pepper, MA, is a teacher in Mableton, Georgia.

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Express Yourself!

Children or youth who are or have been in foster care can share their ideas and artistic talents with the foster parents and social workers who read *Fostering Perspectives*. We are looking for drawings, poems, essays, or other works of self-expression for publication in this newsletter. Creators of published works will receive a small cash award. Mail submissions to: John McMahon, Jordan Institute for Families, 340 Victoria Rd., Pines Bldg., Room 403, Asheville, NC 28801. Drawings 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.

Therapeutic foster parents: Guarding the future one spirit at a time

by John Newnam



John Newnam

Brandon is a nine-year-old boy. He loves Nintendo and basketball, he loves his family, he doesn't like broccoli, and he sleeps in Spiderman pajamas. But there is something that sets Brandon apart from his classmates. It sets him apart from most boys his age. Brandon has seen more in his nine years than most of us see in a lifetime.

Brandon is one of thousands of kids who have witnessed domestic violence, been forced to traffic drugs by their parents, been forced to have sex with strangers to help support the family or their family's drug habit. Brandon has lived in six different homes. He doesn't feel that he is loved, that he can trust anyone, or that he even belongs in this world.

His behavior is hard to understand unless you spend time with him. He pushes us away from him to maintain his safety. He doesn't want to attach to anyone because it would hurt too much to lose another person, another friend, another family member. Brandon doesn't want to sleep because bedrooms to him are scary places. Life is uncertain, and love... love has no meaning.

This was Brandon's life until he met the family he lives with today. Now Brandon feels safe. His nightmares are only in dreams now, not in reality. His pain is still exhibited through his behavior, but now there are safe arms to hold him until his fears fade. Gentle hands help dry his tears. Soft words nurture him through his darkest moments. He feels loved.

Brandon lives with people who have received special training to help mend his broken spirit, who understand that they may be his only hope of finding permanency in his life. Brandon lives with therapeutic foster parents.

Therapeutic Foster Care

It would be wrong to say that traditional foster care is not therapeutic. Any experienced foster parent can tell you about the behaviors, the sadness, and the rage children bring into their homes. And just like therapeutic foster parents, traditional foster parents are knowledgeable, loving people who devote a portion of their lives to helping children and their families.

The two types of foster care differ, however, in the types of children they serve, in what they require of foster parents, and in the compensation they offer. In general, children in therapeutic foster care have more intense, complex needs than children in traditional foster care. Often they have multiple handicaps, including mental illness, substance abuse, developmental disabilities, and intense behavioral misconduct. Some children in therapeutic foster care suffer from all of these conditions.

To prepare them to care for these children, therapeutic foster parents (TFPs) must attend many hours of training over and above the 30 hours of pre-service training (MAPP/GPS) received by traditional foster care providers. Medi-

cation administration, crisis intervention, treatment planning, and intervention implementation are just a few of the topics addressed during this extra training. Like traditional foster parents, TFPs must attend 10 hours of in-service training a year after they are licensed. In addition, they must attend treatment team meetings and IEP (Individual Educational Plan) meetings.

TFPs are compensated at a much higher rate than traditional foster parents. Under the new foster care board rates approved in July 2003, traditional foster parents receive \$365 per month for children aged birth through age five, \$415 for children aged six through 12, and \$465 for children aged 13 through 18. In actuality these monthly amounts are not payments at all, but merely offset expenses parents incur while clothing, feeding, and otherwise providing for the children in their care. TFPs, because of the intensity of the behaviors of the children with whom they work, are paid every month, often at rates two and three times the foster care board rate.

If a family wants to become a therapeutic foster family they should talk to their friends and shop around for the agency that best fits their personality. There are over 30 different agencies that train and support therapeutic foster parents in North Carolina. Some are large, some are small, but their goals are the same: "To provide a safe, nurturing home to children who need help adjusting to life with disabilities and the norms of our society."

For more on these agencies, consult the NC Division of Social Services' list of private child-placing agencies at <<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/childrenservices/licensing/AgencyLists/cpalistfostercare.pdf>>.

Trends and Challenges

Therapeutic foster care in North Carolina has undergone many changes. Initially it was strictly a mental health service. Then it became a service provided by local mental health and local social service agencies. Today it is offered primarily through private nonprofit providers under contract with local agencies.

Therapeutic foster care has faced many challenges and changes in the past few years. Some have been for the best, such as the merging of the NC Division of Facility Services licensure rules and the NC Division of Social Services licensure rules. This has paved the way for more consistent training and licensure standards.

Other changes have made providing care more challenging. Therapeutic foster care providers are held responsible for the care of the child 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To support them, the strategy of therapeutic foster care agencies has been to provide "wraparound services." However, under mental health reform, agencies not associated with the therapeutic foster home provider will be the ones to determine which thera-

pists, counselors, mentors, community-based services, workers, and other forms of support TFPs receive. Yet when agencies unrelated to the therapeutic foster care provider are allowed to provide services, the integrity of the family and service is compromised. When multiple organizations become involved, the supervision of the services becomes fragmented. This diminishes the value of the foster family and delegates treatment decisions to periodic service providers. The system does not embrace the strength of the family as an integral therapeutic structure.

The biggest challenge therapeutic foster care providers will face in the near future involves a new admission and discharge process that will be run by managed care agents who only know the child through documentation. This new system will base all decisions on the child's ability to meet treatment goals. It will not take into account issues of attachment, stability in the community, or the damage done to children each time they are moved to another placement. Those making these decisions will not visit the homes or ask children what they want.

In an era of person-centered planning, the foster child's opinion seems to be the least valued opinion of all. As one foster parent so aptly stated, "It's like dialysis. You don't take someone off of dialysis because now they are doing better. You take them off when a permanent solution presents itself."

If permanency is truly our goal, we need to move children as little as possible. For a few children who suffer from severe trauma, adoption may never be an option. Long-term foster care may be the only realistic answer.

Despite the challenges, the future for therapeutic foster care is promising. Through reform, more and more children will be moving from group homes into therapeutic foster care. As they do, we will need more strong, nurturing families than ever. Therapeutic foster parents and their commitment to our children brings hope to the future. The caring community is the safe house, the loving family the foundation.

John Newnam is a Regional Director for OmniVisions, a private child-placing agency in North Carolina.

Is Therapeutic Foster Care Just About Treatment?

Some people think of therapeutic foster care as short-term treatment for children with long-term needs. There is limited evidence to support this approach. To say that the family structure, parental interventions, and living in a stable nurturing environment with safe and loving role models do not influence the success of the child is unfounded. Evidence suggests that longer stays in the same home with the same family produce better outcomes for children.

Writing Contest

First Prize: \$100

Second Prize: \$50

Third Prize: \$25

Send us a letter or short essay answering this question:

What's something about yourself that you are proud of, and why?

Deadline: March 1, 2004

Anyone under 21 who is or has been in foster care or a group home can enter. Mail your letter to:

John McMahon, Editor
Fostering Perspectives Newsletter
Jordan Institute for Families
340 Victoria Rd., Pines Bldg., Room 403
Asheville, NC 28801

Include your name, age, address, social security number (used to process awards only, your confidentiality will be protected) and phone number. In addition to receiving the awards specified above, winners will have their work published in the next issue. Runners-up may also have their work published, for which they will also receive a cash award.

We're Also Seeking Artwork

Submissions can be on any theme. Submission requirements described above also apply to submissions of artwork, which should be mailed flat (unfolded) on white, unlined paper.

Planting forever seeds

by Caryl Harvey

They left her mid-afternoon, dressed in too-large sweats, holding her worn bag in a death grip.

"I'm Lizabeth."

**"Hi, Lizabeth, can I take your bag for you?"
I reached for it; she drew back.**

Of course, I couldn't take it. It was hers. Inside, a crayon drawing of her mother and another stained, torn sweat suit were her treasures.

I wanted to gather her in my arms, to hug her, to make everything all right. Instead, I asked her if she'd like to see her room.

"Can I watch TV?" She eyed my seven-year-old grandson, sprawled on his stomach in front of the set. At my nod, she plopped down beside him and cupped her chin in her hands. She was eight, and alone, and the TV seemed the friendliest place to be.

Eventually, she left us, but not before she learned all the words to several bedtime stories, and how to make suds on the frilly bath "poof" in the tub. Not until she mastered writing her ABC's on primary "clothesline" paper, biting her tongue with the effort. Not before she found out adults can touch without hurting. She left us, waving frantically from the back window of the car that spirited her away. She cried, and so did we.

Foster children aren't forever. Foster parents are. That's why I love being a foster parent. We plant a seed in a child that grows with her, a seed of self-respect and trust. We don't always get to water it. Sometimes there's only time to drop it into the fertile soil of a young life. We seldom get to see it mature. But we plant our seed nevertheless, in the knowledge that it will make a difference as it grows. A forever difference.

Caryl Harvey is a foster parent in Colorado. This essay was one of the winners of the Colorado State Foster Parent Association's 2003 essay contest on the subject "Why I Love Being a Foster Parent." To read other contest winners, visit the Casey Family Programs National Center for Resource Family Support at <http://www.casey.org/cnc/support_retention/>. Reprinted, with permission, from <www.casey.org/cnc/support_retention/caryl_harvey.htm>.



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