

fostering perspectives

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Staying focused in a time of change

There is a lot of change afoot in North Carolina's child welfare system.

Just consider: a new federal law gives foster parents the **right** to be heard at court hearings. We have new foster home licensing rules. We have new information from the federal government about where our child welfare system is doing well and a new Program Improvement Plan to help us strengthen areas that need it.

And of course we have MRS, the system reform effort that went statewide in 2006 and is still very much underway.

All of these things have implications for foster parents, social workers, and children in care.

But wait! There's more. In addition to these system-level changes, we continue to face those changes that are a permanent part of foster care: the developmental challenges all kids experience, the

struggle of children and their families to adjust to placement, staff and foster parent turnover, long-awaited court decisions . . .

This newsletter can't make change go away. It can, however, provide information to help you navigate the swirling waters of change and offer encouragement to help you stay focused on what really matters: making a positive difference in the lives of children and their families.

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How will new licensing rules affect NC's foster parents?

On September 1, 2007, some important rules for licensing foster homes in North Carolina changed. The biggest impact of this change will be felt by our state's public and private child-placing agencies. But if you are a North Carolina foster parent, you will be affected as well.

This article provides an overview of the rule changes and tells you how to learn more.

Updating the Rules

To protect the public, practitioners of many professions must be licensed either by the government or a professional society. Physicians, psychologists, hairdressers, and electricians all fall into this category.

Although foster parents differ from these licensed professionals in that they aren't paid for what they do, in North Carolina foster parents, too, must be licensed. The box at right explains why.

In our state foster parents are licensed by the NC Division of Social Services and supervised by a public or private agency that trains and

supports them. To be licensed a foster parent must comply with certain rules established by the state.

Periodically the Division and its partners assess licensing rules to ensure they are effective and that they help the state meet its moral and legal obligations to provide the best care possible to children in foster care.

The new rules discussed in this article are the result of one of these periodic reviews. They are the product of a process that took almost three years and involved input from foster parents, youth in foster care, staff from public and private agencies, university partners, and representatives from numerous associations and state agencies.

Key Changes

Here is a summary of licensing rule changes that will be of particular interest to foster parents. This is not a comprehensive listing of rule changes. Unless otherwise noted, the rules discussed went into effect September 1, 2007.

Why Does NC License Foster Homes?

For the Children. Because they have been abused and neglected, children placed in foster care sometimes have needs and maladaptive behaviors that other children don't. Children placed in foster care need and deserve temporary caretakers who understand their situation and who can meet their individual needs. Licensing is one way to ensure that foster families are up to the task of caring for these children.

For Birth Families. Although the parents of children in foster care have been temporarily deprived of custody, they have a right to expect that the care being provided to their children is at least equal to the care that they themselves would provide. Licensing ensures that foster parents have met certain minimum criteria in training and other areas.

For Foster Parents. The licensing process ensures that foster parents know about the risks and rewards involved in fostering, receive the information they need to care for children in foster care, and make an informed choice about whether to foster. Licensing helps assure that foster families and the agency have a working partnership that is centered on building on the strengths and meeting the needs of children and families.

For the Child-Placing Agency. In North Carolina the ultimate legal and moral responsibility for ensuring the safety, well-being, and permanence of a child in foster care rests with the county department of social services that has custody of that child. If the child is being cared for through a contract with a private agency, the private agency has legal and moral responsibilities as well. Licensing is a way to make sure that these parties are legally protected and working as a team to live up to their responsibilities to families and children.

From A Supplemental Guide to Foster Home Licensing (NCDSS, 2007)

New licensing rules *continued from page 1*

1. Reduced Capacity of Foster Homes

The capacity rules for family foster care and therapeutic foster care have changed.

Family Foster Care. Under the new rules, no more than five total children can be cared for in the home. This includes children in foster care, the foster parent's children, licensed capacity for in-home day care, children kept for babysitting, and any other children living in the home.

Effective Date: Family foster homes receiving their first license after September 1, 2007 cannot have more than five children in the home. Already-licensed family foster homes have until July 1, 2008 to reduce the total number of children in the home to five. **Note:** Exceptions to this rule can be made in order to place siblings together, as long as the placing agency documents the need for this exception as outlined in the new rules [see 70E .1001 (c) (1), (3), (4)].

Therapeutic Foster Care. Under the new rules only two foster children can be placed in a therapeutic foster home. This change was made so that the Division's rules are consistent with the Medicaid/Mental Health service definition of therapeutic foster care.

In addition, under the new rules no more than four total children can live in a therapeutic foster home.

Effective Date: Therapeutic foster homes receiving their first license after September 1, 2007 cannot have more than two foster children in the home. Already-licensed therapeutic foster homes have until January 1, 2008 to reduce the total number of foster children in the home to two. **Note:** the Division permits an increase in the number of foster children in therapeutic foster homes if it means siblings will be placed together, as long as the placing agency documents the need for this exception as outlined in the new rules. **However** this exception CANNOT be implemented until there is a change in the Mental Health/Medicaid service definition.

2. All Adults Must Be Licensed

Under the new rules, individuals who are married or are considered a couple are presumed to be co-parents. Therefore both must complete the licensing process.

Similarly, the new rules also state that any adult (21 years of age or older) living in the foster home is presumed to have parental responsibilities for children in foster care and therefore must meet all requirements for foster care licensing. This includes the requirements for pre-service and ongoing training.

Effective Date: For already-licensed foster homes, supervising agencies must provide

training and complete all required licensure requirements for all adults residing in the home by September 1, 2008. Waivers may be granted if the supervising agency documents that the adult has absolutely no responsibility for the care, supervision, or discipline of children in foster care.

3. Restricted Sleeping Arrangements

Under the new rules all children must have their own beds and may not share a bed.

4. Additions to Signed Agreements

There have been some key additions to the agreements foster parents and agencies must sign. New to the Foster Parents' Agreement is a clause that pertains to supervision of children in foster care. It states that the foster parent shall "provide any child placed in the home with supervision at all times while the child is in the home [and] not leave the child unsupervised." If an older child can be left alone for certain time frames these must be spelled out in the out-of-home family services agreement or person-centered plan.

The new rules also require agencies to commit in writing to: (1) include foster parents as part of the decision-making team for a child, and (2) allow foster parents to review and receive copies of their licensing record.

Also, previously the rules addressed proper treatment of children in foster care (e.g., no cruel, abusive, or corporal punishment, etc.). Many (but not all) agencies used Discipline Agreements to meet these requirements. Now, under the new licensing rules, all agencies are required to develop a Discipline Agreement.

Both the Foster Parents' Agreement and the Discipline Agreement must be signed and dated by the foster parents and an agency representative before initial licensure and relicensure; a copy of each must be retained by the foster parents and the agency.

5. Training Requirements

Therapeutic Foster Care. Effective January 1, 2008, therapeutic foster parents are required to receive 10 hours of pre-service training in a specific curriculum. Supervising agencies must also make this curriculum available to currently licensed therapeutic foster parents.

All Foster Parents. Under the new rules foster parents must complete training in the areas of first-aid, CPR, medication administration, and universal precautions **before** a child is placed in their home. (Under the old rule foster parents had a year to complete this training after licensure.) The new rules also make it clear that foster parents must receive 10 hours of in-service training each year.

6. Children's Rights

Under the new rules foster parents must ensure children are provided with opportunities to participate in recreational activities (e.g., afterschool sports, clubs, etc.).

To Learn More

- Talk to your licensing social worker, since this person is responsible for guiding you through the relicensing process.
- Read the new rules online. Go to <www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/licensing> and click on "foster care rules."
- Use this same link to find a *Supplemental Guide to Foster Home Licensing*. Licensing professionals are the primary audience, but you may find it helpful.

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

Helping children who have been sexually abused

It is not uncommon for children placed in foster care to have been sexually abused. Often social workers placing these children are not aware of the sexual abuse.

In many cases, this abuse is first discovered by the child's foster family. Night time and bath time are scary for many children who have experienced sexual abuse. Having a caregiver there to console them and listen to them may bring forth birth family secrets. As children feel more secure, they may gradually share details of things that have happened to them.

Given this, foster and adoptive parents must learn all they can about the needs of the child in care.

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is the interaction, including non-physical contact (such as verbal abuse, exposure, or pornographic photos) and physical contact between a child and a person in a power position, in which the child is used for sexual gratification of the abuser and/or others. Child sexual abuse can be perpetrated by anyone, but we will focus on family abuse (incest).

Children who have been sexually abused by a family member are often enveloped into a secret life. There are many reasons these children don't tell, including:

1. They don't understand that it is wrong. It is a family cycle. Children are kept in seclusion without outside interactions to sustain the secret.

2. The child may not have the verbal capacity to tell. Words like "vagina" could have been replaced by the offender with "knee" to disguise sexual abuse if disclosed by the young child.

3. Children are taught to respect and obey adults. Adults forget to explain that there are limits to this obedience.

4. Children feel guilty if telling could cause their loved one (abuser) to go to jail or their family to be broken apart.



How can foster parents address troubling behaviors while helping children feel safe?

5. Boys feel ashamed because they are taught to fight and take control. They may worry the abuse will "make them" homosexual. Society makes it hard for boys to tell.

Sometimes there is a parent in the home who did not know about the abuse. Abusers work very hard to keep the incest a secret, setting up private time with the child and pressuring them with words or actions

not to tell anyone. If the non-offending parent did know about or suspect the sexual abuse, she or he may have been too ashamed to seek help. Or, the parent may have feared the breakup of the family or the loss of the abuser's love or support.

Women sexually abuse children, too. We seldom catch them because we openly accept their "nurturing behaviors." A woman bathing, sleeping with, dressing, and touching children seems normal to society. We do not easily suspect a woman may be crossing the line from nurturing to sexual abuse. In other cases, a woman may not abuse the child herself, but may allow or set up access to the child.

Addressing Behaviors

How can caregivers help a child feel safe, not over-controlled and not guilty? There are common behaviors of sexually abused children that challenge caregivers. Excessive masturbating in public, lack of boundaries, and sexually playing with toys are a few examples. These are "learned" behaviors and can be replaced with more appropriate ones if patiently taught by caring foster or adoptive parents. But this isn't one person's job: it is the treatment team's responsibility to do this together.

In the adjacent box you will find some suggestions for ways to address certain behaviors and make children who have been sexually abused feel safe.

*Adapted from "Foster Parenting a Sexually Abused Child" by Donna Gillespie Foster, from *Fostering Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 1.*

Ways to Help Sexually Abused Children

1. **Be friendly but clear with your household rules.** Develop a plan that spells out how to live in your home. Don't assume children know these things. Write it down and give a copy to your social worker so he or she is aware how your family functions. This can be helpful if anyone questions your life-style.

Note: Rules are developed only when there is a need. For example, masturbation is a common and natural way for children to soothe themselves. It can become an excessive need for a child who has been sexually stimulated over a long time period. It can show up when the child is insecure, deep in thought, etc. Many times, the child isn't aware of what he or she is doing. Instead of shaming the child, establish guidelines for what children should do if they find they need to "touch themselves."

Suggested Guidelines: Must be alone with door shut and shades closed, don't cause pain or bleeding, no objects can be used, time alone is limited to 15 minutes. Add the guidelines you feel are important. Then give children the opportunity to develop self-esteem and other interests. Their need to masturbate will usually lessen.

2. **Listen to the child when he or she is disclosing; don't tell the child how to feel or what to say.** Children don't always need advice, but they do need to vent. Let them use their own words, even if they are offensive to you. You can help them replace their offensive words with more acceptable ones later when they aren't opening their souls up to you. Build trust. Do not promise not to tell anyone what is shared. Rather, say, "I won't share the information unless I feel there is someone who can help. I will tell you who I feel we need to share this information with."

3. **Don't talk badly about the child's birth family.** A child's family is part of her identity; these connections are vital to the outcome of her life. If she is currently separated from the non-offender and her siblings, she may feel isolated and afraid. Helping the child to visit her family will help build the child's trust in you.

4. **Record any information,** such as birth parents' behavior with child, signals of sexual abuse of the child, and disclosures from the child or family. Report these to the child's social worker immediately. Report your reactions to what you observed. Keep a copy of everything you submit.

5. **Let the child talk about his feelings** about his family, including the offender. Regardless of how we feel about them, incest perpetrators are still very important to the families they have betrayed. In psychological terms they are still central attachments for the family. You might want to tell the child, "There are safe ways parents can show children 'love' and that is what the social workers and doctors are trying to teach your parents."

6. **Teach the child some of the other ways parents can show children caring and love.** This is another reason why foster and adoptive parents have to be friendly and clear with boundaries: so the child can learn. Remember, repeating the rules and expectations will be necessary until the child can create new, positive habits. This is an opportunity to work on enhancing the child's self-esteem by spending quality time with him. Show the child how to have fun, laugh, and play. This may be the first time the child has freely experienced this type of interaction.

7. **Create a "life book" with the child** to help her put her past, present, and future into perspective. It will help lessen her confusion. Social workers and therapists can use the life book as a tool in counseling the child.

8. **Make it clear that adults are responsible for keeping kids safe.** Children often feel they caused the abuse and are to blame for all that's happened in their family. It is very healing for a child simply to be in a home with clear rules and expectations, enforced consistently and fairly by the adults. This helps children understand they are responsible for their own actions, but not the actions of adults.

9. **Ask for help when needed.** If a child continues to show sexualized behavior that cannot be redirected, he or she may need help from a therapist experienced in working with children who have been sexually abused. Children might also have problems with depression, anxiety, and other disorders. Talk with the child's treatment team about any signs that the child is distressed or having difficulty functioning.

What you should know about recent federal review of NC

This spring the federal government assessed our state's child welfare system using the Child and Family Services Review, a formal assessment process that occurs every five years or so. Because it can influence the focus and direction of a state's child welfare system for years, this review is a relatively big deal.

North Carolina expended quite a bit of energy in 2007 preparing for the review, participating in the review in March, and waiting for the results. Now they are in.

This article explores the conclusions reached by North Carolina's latest review and their implications for our system.

The CFSR Process

When it conducts the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), the federal government assesses a state child welfare system's ability to achieve positive outcomes for children and families in three broad areas: safety, permanency, and well-being. There are many specific indicators under each of these categories, each of which is given a rating by reviewers based on the extent to which federal benchmarks are met.

To assess a state, reviewers draw on many sources of information, including quantitative statewide data, interviews with child welfare system stakeholders (including families, children, and foster parents), and a review of 65 case files from three counties. Catawba, Mecklenburg, and Nash counties were the three that participated in our 2007 review.

Strengths

Federal reviewers identified many strengths in our state's child welfare system. Those of special interest to foster parents include:

- **Education.** Reviewers said North Carolina does a good job providing services to meet children's educational needs.
- **Placements close to home.** Reviewers celebrated the fact that children are often placed close to parents and possible permanent caregivers.
- **Siblings placed together.** The CFSR found NC children

were consistently placed with siblings unless there was a valid reason not to.

- **Health.** Reviewers found our state to be effective in addressing the physical health needs of children involved in the child welfare system.
- **Meeting foster parent needs.** The CFSR concluded NC agencies are "highly effective" with regard to assessing and meeting the service needs of children and foster parents.
- **LINKS.** The CFSR stated that although services to help children transition from foster care to independent living are of very high quality, there are not enough of these services.

Needs

Although these findings are good, federal reviewers also identified a great number of areas where the performance of our system needs improvement. Some of the most significant concerns pertain to:

- **Placement instability:** it found most foster care placement changes were due to the child's behavior and the lack of intervention on the part of the agency to support foster families before behavior problems resulted in a disrupted placement
- **Inconsistent efforts to target recruitment of foster homes for special populations**
- **Insufficient involvement of children's fathers and paternal relatives**
- **Delays and barriers to filing for or achieving termination of parental rights (TPR)**
- **Lack of the substance abuse treatment, mental health, and domestic violence services needed to address the needs of children and families served by child welfare**

There are many more. Although these are serious concerns, it is worth noting that the Administration for Children and Families itself states that it has set a very high standard of performance for

This review is a big deal—it can influence a state's child welfare system for years.

the review to encourage states to achieve positive outcomes for children and families.

Now What?

In response to the CFSR findings and in consultation with the federal government, our state is developing a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to enhance its child welfare system. Workgroups of statewide stakeholders convened in May to focus on improvements in five key areas: (1) child, youth, and family involvement, (2) court involvement, (3) accountability, (4) cultural competence, and (5) inter-agency collaboration. Based on input from these groups, North Carolina is seeking to:

- Enhance court collaboration to address delays
- Reduce placement moves for children in foster care
- Strengthen the child and family team meeting process
- Improve targeted recruitment of foster parents



- Redesign NC's quality assurance system (e.g., the Division's periodic reviews of county DSS agencies)
- Engage in strategic planning with county DSS supervisors to address practice and system issues
- Address the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in the system

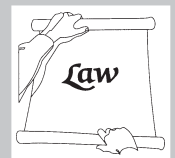
As you can tell from looking at this list—which isn't comprehensive—the impact of the CFSR will be felt by foster parents and everyone else involved with child welfare in North Carolina for some time.

To Learn More

- To read the CFSR, go to <<http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/stats/docs/NC%20CFSR%202007%20Final%20Report.pdf>>

Important New North Carolina Laws

- **A New Right to Be Heard in Court.** Until recently, foster parents in North Carolina had an "opportunity" to be heard at court hearings. Thanks to 2007 legislation passed by the NC Legislature (HB 698), as of October 1, 2007, foster parents have a "right" to be heard in court. To exercise this right you must be in court. DSS is required to inform you about court dates, so make sure you know what their process is to keep you informed.
- **Change in Criminal History Requirements.** To comply with the federal Adam Walsh Act, North Carolina passed a law (HB 698) prohibiting individuals convicted or indicted for the following crimes from providing foster care or adopting children: (1) child abuse or neglect; (2) spousal abuse; (3) a crime against a child, including child pornography; (4) a crime involving violence, including rape, sexual assault, or homicide, no matter when it occurred. Individuals with a felony conviction or pending felony indictment for physical assault, battery, or a drug-related offense are also prohibited from providing foster care or adopting children if the offense was committed within the past five years. Agencies conduct criminal history checks on foster parents when they first obtain their license and every time a license is renewed (every 2 years).
- **Sharing of Nonidentifying Information about Adoptees' Birth Families.** As of January 1, 2008, North Carolina law (HB 445) permits private child-placing agencies and county DSS agencies (1) to perform confidential intermediary services for adoptees age 21 or older without a court order; (2) to obtain and share nonidentifying birth family health information or facilitate contact or share identifying information with adult adoptees, adult lineal descendants with deceased adoptees, and biological parents with the written consent of all parties to the contact or sharing of information; (3) to obtain and share nonidentifying information with adoptive parents of minor adoptees without appointment by the court.



Source: <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/Sessions/2007/Bills/House/HTML/H445v4.html>
<http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/Sessions/2007/Bills/House/HTML/H698v5.html>

MRS: NC continues major child welfare reform effort

This issue talks a lot about the changes afoot in North Carolina's child welfare system. For example, it discusses in some detail the state's new rules for foster home licensing and it describes improvements we hope to

To make MRS work, foster parents must see themselves as supporting birth families, not replacing them.

make in response to the latest Child and Family Services Review. These changes are important, because sooner or later they will affect you as a foster parent.

However, if you want to talk about one of the most important influences on the lives of North Carolina's foster parents and children, you must look not at what's new, but at something that's already here: MRS.

Multiple Response System

The Multiple Response System (MRS) is a reform effort that aims to make our child welfare system more family-centered. It began in 10 North Carolina counties in 2002, was refined by an additional 42 counties starting in 2003, and was integrated into state policy in 2006. Despite this fact, some counties are still striving to implement aspects of MRS.

This is understandable once you consider what a multifaceted approach MRS is. It has seven core strategies:

1. Collaboration between Work First and child welfare
 2. Strengths-based, structured intake process
 3. Choice of two approaches to reports of child abuse, neglect, or dependency
 4. Coordination between law enforcement agencies and CPS for the investigative assessment approach
 5. Redesign of CPS in-home family services
 6. Child and family team meetings during the provision of CPS in-home and placement services
 7. Shared parenting meetings during the first seven days a child is placed out of the home
- These strategies have changed and

will continue to change the way many social workers, foster parents, and others do their jobs throughout the entire continuum of child welfare. Two of these strategies in particular have a direct effect on foster parents:

shared parenting and child and family team meetings.

Shared Parenting

Shared parenting is an approach designed to build a team focused on the welfare of the child: an alliance among birth parents, foster parents, and social workers. As with any team, trust is the foundation of this alliance.

Of course, there can be barriers to this trust. Some foster parents, for example, are initially uncomfortable with the idea of helping or even meeting the parents of their children in foster care. First and foremost, they worry about the safety of the children and their own safety.

For their part, some birth parents see foster parents as direct competitors for their child's affection and usurpers of their parental authority. Clearly, ideas and assumptions such as these do not facilitate the building of trust.

For shared parenting to work, foster parents must be clear about their role, which is to supplement and support birth families, not replace them. Foster parents must see themselves as part of the team working to rebuild and reunite families.

Some North Carolina foster parents already see themselves this way, and are fully integrated into the team serving the child and family. Others may not be there quite yet, and so may need support from their agencies and other foster parents.

The central mechanism for building trust and teamwork in the shared parenting approach is an agency-facilitated meeting that occurs as soon as possible after children enter foster care. In fact, MRS asks agencies to facilitate a

shared parenting meeting within seven days after a child enters foster care. After this initial meeting, shared parenting meetings occur regularly until the family can be reunited or another permanent plan is identified.

CFTs

Under MRS, county DSS agencies hold child and family team meetings (CFTs) with families involved with child welfare services. The primary functions of these meetings are to engage the family and other interested parties in joint decision-making and to provide the family with support. These meetings address the family's strengths and needs and how these affect the child's safety, permanence, and well-being. The meeting also results in a plan that specifies what must occur to help the family safely parent the children.

Child and family team meetings occur soon after the decision is made to substantiate or reach a finding of "in need of services." CFTs are used with the family throughout the life of the case, even if it is not necessary to remove the child from the home.

Foster parents benefit from CFTs in several ways. Although foster parents will have already met the birth family at the shared parenting meeting, CFTs offer another great opportunity to build a relationship with and obtain information from the child's parents.

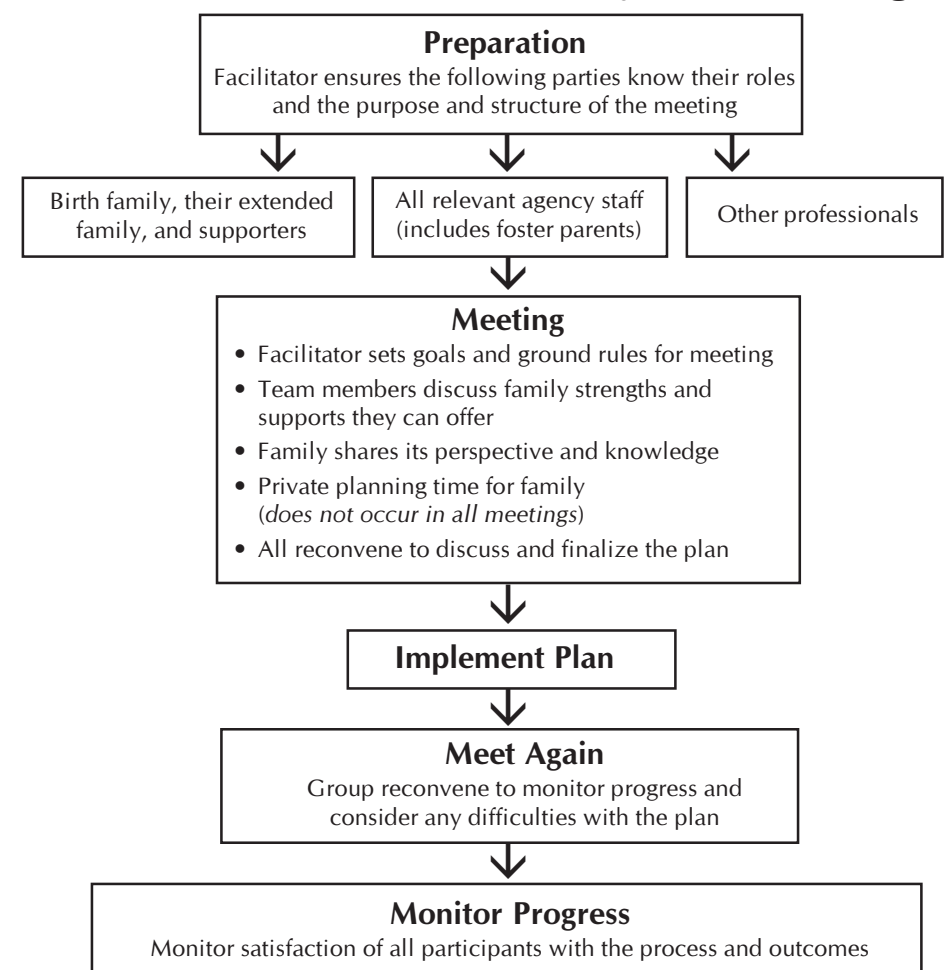
In addition, CFTs allow foster parents to be there in person when important information is discussed and service agreements are made and reviewed. This enables foster parents to be part of the reunification effort, or whatever the permanent plan is for the child in their care.

The bottom line is, child and family team meetings are a great way for foster parents to stay up-to-date and to be active, contributing members of the team serving the family and child.

Links to Learn More . . .

- **MRS** <www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs>.
- **CFTs** <www.practicenotes.org/vol8_no2.htm>
- **Shared Parenting** <www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp_v10n1/shared.htm>

Overview of a Child and Family Team Meeting





North Carolina Foster and

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

From the association's president by Stacey Darbee

Upcoming NCFAPA Conference

NCFAPA is excited to invite you to our 10th annual conference, which will take place on April 25-27, 2008. SAVE THE DATE!

This year's theme will be *Shining the Spotlight—A Decade of Dedication!* The conference will be held at Twin City Quarter in Winston-Salem. This venue consists of the Benton Convention Center, the Marriott, and Embassy Suites. All three connect, allowing conference goers to move from one to the other without going outside.

We have secured 200 rooms at special low rates: Marriott rooms are \$99 per night, while one bedroom suites at Embassy Suites are \$119 per night. Make your reservations now. Just go to <www.NCFAPA.org> and select the "Reserve Your Room Now."

The NCFAPA Planning Team has done a great job and we have an absolutely amazing conference planned! There will be dozens of workshops, fantastic general sessions, and a very different kind of game night! We're also bringing back a night to dress up, coupled with entertainment surprises. You won't want to miss it! Visit our web site soon for more information and registration instructions.

The 2008 NCFAPA membership drive is now underway. Join in October, November, or December 2007 and receive free registration to the April conference. We listened to our members and have tried to make joining simple: just go to our website, fill out the membership form, and pay for membership using Paypal.

Board of Directors

Congratulations to newly elected (and reelected) board members:

Region 1—Wanda Douglas, Co-Wefa Lyda (historian), Tony Douglas, Crystal Merritt

Region 2—Melissa Sink (VP), Paul Roodhuyzen (Treasurer), Janet Martin

Region 3—Shelly Humphrey

Region 4—Aaryn Fazakerly (VP), Judy Carroll, Jimmie Graham Jr., Ruth Moody, L'Sonja Parker, Janice Nichols

Advocacy

Good news! NCFAPA advocated strongly throughout the year for the following legislation, which became NC law in 2007:

Youths aging out of foster care and youths with special needs adopted from foster care after age 12 now have access to funding to help them attend public colleges and community colleges in NC. What's covered?

- Tuition/fees normally assessed a student carrying the same academic workload as determined by the institution, including costs for rental or purchase of equipment, materials, or supplies required of all students in the same course of study
- An allowance for books, supplies, transportation, and miscellaneous personal expenses, including a reasonable allowance for the documented rental or purchase of a personal computer, for a student attending the institution on at least a half-time basis, as determined by the college

- An allowance (as determined by the college) for room and board costs incurred by the student



To support this new law, funds have been appropriated for fiscal years 2008 and 2009. No news yet on how to apply—we'll keep you posted.

Effective October 1, 2007, children aging out of foster care are eligible to receive Medicaid through their 21st birthday. Includes:

- Medicaid coverage to independent foster care adolescents, ages 18, 19, and 20 regardless of their assets, resources, or income levels

Adoption Tax Credit

- An individual who is allowed a federal adoption tax credit for the taxable year is also allowed a NC tax credit
- The credit is equal to 50% of the amount of the federal tax credit
- Effective for the tax year beginning Jan. 1, 2007; it will expire after the 2012 tax year unless it is extended

Support

In 2007-2008 NCFAPA will focus on helping develop, strengthen, rejuvenate, or jump start local support groups and/or associations. We would like to offer your local or county group extra training and support to help you succeed. Please call our office (866/623-7248) and leave a message; we will get back to you as soon as we can. We're eager to help you maintain your association or to develop a brand new group. We look forward to working with you!

November Is Adoption Awareness Month

If you are an adoptive parent you already know what an impact adoption has had on your children and your entire family. You are the most powerful voice that belongs to the face of adoption. You are the strongest recruitment ad that there is! North Carolina has hundreds of children who are legally free for adoption. Please make a special effort during November to speak with neighbors, friends, co-workers, and your faith community about all the children in need of a special, loving family to call home. Remember—Kids Can't Wait!

Join the Association!

Membership is open to anyone interested in strengthening foster and adoptive services in North Carolina. Send this form, with payment (DO NOT send cash), to: NCFAPA, 330 S. Greene St., Suite 200, Greensboro, NC 27401. Make checks payable to the NC FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT ASSOCIATION.

Regular Membership is open to any foster or adoptive parent and is \$50 annually for an individual and \$75 annually for a couple. **Associate Membership** (\$100 annually for an individual and \$300 annually for an organization) is available to those who do not qualify for Regular Membership.

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

Last name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

County: _____ Licensing Agency: _____

Home phone: () _____ E-mail: _____

Membership Amt. included: _____ Donation Amt.: _____

Adoptive Parent Association

330 S. Greene St., Suite 200 • Greensboro, NC 27401 • 866/623-7248 (toll free)



Honoring NC's foster and adoptive parents and their partners

The NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association's 10th Annual Training Institute, *Shining the Spotlight—A Decade of Dedication!* will be held April 25–27, 2008 at the Twin City Quarter in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. At this event we will celebrate the impact foster and adoptive parents have on children and families in our state.

Therefore we are asking you to submit nominations for a foster family or adoptive family in your region of the state who has put a spotlight on building a child's self-esteem, or who has gone above and beyond in their dedication to children and families. We're proud to provide you with this opportunity to honor and recognize these special individuals.

Please use the nomination form below to submit nominations to the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association by **February 15, 2008**. A committee of the NCFAPA's Board of Directors will review the nominations and award one foster family and one adoptive family per region. Winners will receive an award and be honored at April's training institute.

Thanks for joining us in celebrating the efforts of people who care for our children and families.

Nomination Form

Nominee is a: Foster family Adoptive family

Nominee's name: _____

Nominee's address: _____

Nominee's county of residence: _____

Phone(s): _____

E-mail: _____

Nominated by: _____

Address: _____

Phone(s): _____

E-mail: _____

On a separate sheet answer this question: **How has this nominee put a spotlight on building a child's self-esteem or gone above and beyond in their dedication to children and families?** (250 words or less)

Deadline: Send nominations to NCFAPA via e-mail to office@ncfapa.org or via fax (919/367-9302) by **February 15, 2008**.

2007 Honorees

The following photos show some of the people recognized at the Association's 2007 training institute.

Foster Parents



ABOVE (l to r): Lisa Richmond (Region 3), Linda and Tim Shuford (Region 1). Not pictured: Bethanne Klauck (Region 2), Brian and Toi Pettus (Region 4)

LEFT (l to r): Penny Withrow (Region 1), David and Kelly Daiker (Region 3), Teresa Baum (Chatham Co. DSS). Not pictured: Lorinza and Queenie Smith (Region 2), Kay and Larry Monk (Region 4)

Adoptive Parents



Community Partners



Left to Right: Tianna McDonald (Edgecombe Co. DSS), James and Margaret Davis (Region 4), Linda Rudolph (SafePlace), Dawn Stallings (Region 2), Wanda and Tony Douglas (Region 1)

Human Services Providers



Left to Right: Joan McAllister (NC Division of Social Services), John McMahon (UNC-CH School of Social Work), Bob Hensley (NC Division of Social Services), Stacy Cholula (Guilford Co. DSS), Alexis Powe (Region 2), Roberta Yates (Watauga Co. DSS). Honorees not pictured: Nancy Carter and Bill Griffin (ILR, Inc.)

Monthly visits with my social worker

In our last writing contest we asked young people in foster care to send us a short essay describing what they think about the monthly visits they have with their social workers.



In particular, we wanted to know how these visits made them feel and what could make them better.

We asked children to focus on this topic for a simple reason: visits matter. This is supported by evidence from the first round of federal reviews, which linked high-quality visits with better outcomes for children and their families. It is also supported by the essays on this page, which testify to the power and importance of monthly visits.

If you are a child welfare worker or a foster parent, we hope you will continually assess the quality and frequency of agency visits with children in care. They can make such a difference in children's lives.

—John McMahon, Editor

Ronda, age 15

Monthly visits I have leave me very happy! I'm happy afterwards because [my social worker] tells me how proud of me she is, which I'm proud of myself as well because I'm making A and B Honor Roll.

She is helpful because she literally bends over backwards to help foster kids like me. I can't think of anything to make her better at what she does because she has already helped me so much to change my life around, fix my mistakes, and to feel normal again. Ms. Juanita has been an angel in disguise. She has been there when I needed someone to talk to or if I needed help with something. She is just always here when I need her. I think all foster care social workers are miracle workers . . . So next time you see your [social worker] how about thanking them?

Ronda received \$15 for having her essay published.

Heather, age 11

My social worker's name is Marcie Bland-Boughman. The monthly visits with Marcie are good. Marcie takes me out to eat, and to the store, and she takes me to her office. When Marcie comes to my house she likes to look at my stuff. I show her my room, my trophies, and my games. When Marcie comes to visit it makes me feel good, special, and important. Marcie keeps me updated on things like court dates, and on family members. I could not change anything about my monthly visits!!!

Heather received \$15 for having her essay published.

Anthony, age 11

My social worker makes me feel good about myself. I can talk with her about any issue—my family, school, problems, my foster family, etc.

The thing I like most about her is she makes sure she lets me know how my other family members are doing. My social worker also introduces strategies to problem solving if I have any problems. My social worker keeps up with my grades, listens to me play my band instrument, comes into my messy room (which can be dangerous), and most of all she listens to me. My social worker makes sure that my foster family and me are getting along. I can tell she wants the best for me and tries to help me in growing up to be productive and successful in society as a young man. I plan to show thanks to her and my foster family as I plan to reach my goals as being part of law enforcement.

Anthony's letter won first prize, for which he was awarded \$100.

She makes sure that my foster family and me are getting along.

1

Kelli, age 15

Monthly visits with my social worker are good because we are always laughing with or about each other and we're just being ourselves. . . . I'm not going to lie—sometimes she does make me a little ill. [But] I forget about it and do what I had planned that day . . .

What makes her most helpful is that she helps me get through some of my troubles and tells me everything will get better. She's always telling me to help make things better or things will never get better. That helps me a lot because if I didn't have someone to help me through my problems I don't know what I would do. My guess is probably something stupid . . .

[She] would be . . . a better social worker if she just let me go home to my real house. If she would just let me go home everything would be great. If that would happen then she would be the greatest social worker ever!

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

I'm not going to lie — sometimes she she does make me a little ill.

2

Colby, age 15

I can thankfully say that I am no longer in foster care. I live in a large family that I love and know love me. I could not have been placed in a family that is more loving than the one that I have now. There is not anyone in the world I can thank for that other than my social worker.

Around 11 years ago I was put into foster care and received my social worker. At the time I was really too young to understand exactly what was going on or who a social worker was. All I could understand is at such a hard time in my life was there was a lady (my social worker) that I visited every month. My social worker made me feel loved and secure. Don't get me wrong, my foster family at the time did the same for me—but my social worker was someone that I could rely on if I needed something and I didn't feel comfortable going to my foster family about it. . . .

I had a social worker that was everything I mentioned in this paper but she was so much more to me also. In fact it would probably take forever just to explain how wonderful she was so I am going to stop by saying that there isn't anything that I would have liked changed about my social worker. *Colby's letter won third prize, for which he was awarded \$25.*

3

What do teens want from foster parents?

by Joan McAllister and Nancy Carter

Many North Carolina teens in foster care are placed out-of-county in group homes and child care institutions. This isn't surprising, if you consider that most of the families we recruit to foster or adopt are not interested in teens.

But it would be wrong to assume that, based on this, there are **no** families interested in caring for teens, or that teens themselves don't want to live with families.

True, being a foster parent for a teenager or a young adult is very different from being a foster parent for a younger child. But for the most part the difference lies in the normal challenges of adolescent development, not in the young person's foster care status.

Teens and young adults are literally adults-in-training. They need—and want—life models, life coaches, and opportunities to develop into the people they can be.

Perhaps the real problem is that we haven't made a strong enough effort to recruit foster families specifically for teens and young adults. Who knows? Perhaps we should even ask teens to help us.

As a first step in that direction, we'd like to share with you the things some teens we know say they need in a foster parent.

Someone who will make you a part of their family.

Teens don't like to be singled out as "different." This is especially true in the foster family, where fairness is key: if a foster youth is the same age as another child in your home, she wants to be treated as the other child would be treated. If rules are different for them, the reasons should be fair. Opportunities must exist for the foster youth to earn the same privileges as other youth.

Someone who has a good attitude about being a foster parent.

While every parent has frustrating days, a successful foster parent enjoys his or her role most of the time.

Fostering teens is an opportunity to provide youths with a "toolkit" of skills that will help them survive in the real world. Having a "good attitude" means allowing youths to practice those skills—even if it means the kitchen is a mess. In fact, a messy kitchen is really an opportunity to teach cleaning and organization while reinforcing the teen's desire to make his afterschool snack. Coming home and saying "Wow, you must have enjoyed their afternoon snack. Looks like it's time to get moving on a cleanup," can go a lot further than, "What happened to MY kitchen? You are never

Real love offers real hope. Foster parents can offer that hope and give young people a reason to reach for tomorrow.

to use it again! Do you understand me?"

Someone who isn't "in it for the money."

It's hard to believe, but some teens think some people provide foster care for the money. Part of the problem may be that teens don't understand what things cost. While we don't recommend that foster parents constantly em-

phasize how much they pay out of pocket to care for the teens in their homes, taking the teen shopping for groceries, having discussions of household bills and budgets, giving the teen responsibility for purchasing some of his own necessities, etc., can help him or her get a better sense of the cost of living. This is, of course, an important life skill in itself.

Someone who shows they care about your feelings; someone who is nice, respectful, and loving.

Many teens in foster care come from backgrounds in which both positive and negative emotions were often expressed in extreme, inaccurate, or inappropriate ways. Youth need to know how to express emotions appropriately. They need to feel the joy of knowing that a respected adult cares about them and how they feel. Developmentally, teens are often on a rollercoaster ride of emotions. Having someone who can model a caring, calm, and respectful response enhances teens' positive development.

Someone who sets rules but isn't obsessive about them.

Be fair about rules and guidelines. Make sure you understand why they exist and communicate those reasons clearly to teens. Developmentally, teens are trying to discern moral reasoning, so it is realistic to expect teens to ask "why?" Indeed, you should encourage them to do so. It is equally realistic to expect adults to respond appropriately, calmly, and with respect. Being overly dramatic about rules will only reinforce inappropriate ways of expression.

Someone who is a good listener.

Everyone likes to be heard. Yet teens are not known for being the "let's sit and talk" population. In fact, they have a reputation for limiting their communication with adults.

The best way to get teens to talk to you is to involve them in something or, better yet, get involved in something they are doing. For instance, get them involved in helping with dinner. While you both have your hands busy, ask about their day. Mention a show you saw



Photo Illustration

and why you think they may like it. Ask if there's something they've heard about that you might find interesting. Inquire whether they've ever considered working in the food industry. You might even try asking them if they could teach you some easy ways to navigate a website, do searches, format a document, create a power point presentation, etc.

Once you get involved with teens the communication becomes much easier, AND you learn a thing or two about their strengths and interests.

Someone who believes "real love" can overcome many struggles.

Does anyone really know what "real love" is? Maybe this is a starting point for a dinner conversation. There's no right or wrong answer, so the person asking for "real love" is the only one who can define it. Typical responses may include "loving me even when I do the wrong thing," "will never leave me," "someone I can't wait to see each day," etc.

The real message in this statement is, "I need hope that things will be better." Young people in foster care continue to seek hope in a better day, a better time, a better age—something better than what is available to them right now.

Real love offers real hope. And with real hope a young person can get through today and reach for tomorrow. Foster parents can offer that hope and give young people a reason to reach for tomorrow.

Joan McAllister coordinates the NC LINKS program for the NC Division of Social Services. Nancy Carter is the Executive Director of ILR, Inc.

NC Foster Care Facts



In state fiscal year (SFY) 2005-06:

- There were 1,330 children age 13-17 in care
- Half (50%) of these teens were placed in non-family settings (i.e., group or institutional care)

In contrast, during this same time only 2% of foster children age 0 to 5 and 18% of foster children age 6 to 12 were placed in non-family settings.

(Source: Duncan, et al., 2007)



Books on the nightstand

A book review by Becky Burmester

A book store regularly e-mails me a survey. The questions are an attempt to learn what influences my purchasing decisions. I frequently select books based on the information on the cover. Pictures don't matter much to me, but words are important.

The Connected Child by Karyn Purvis, Ph.D., David Cross, Ph.D. and Wendy Lyons Sunshine has a cover that captured my interest. A bright yellow circle promises to "Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family."

After a solid week of fruitless nagging about meals, homework, etc. with my adopted 7-year-old son, this sounded like just what I needed.

Below the title the book continues selling itself, indicating it is for parents who have welcomed children from other countries and cultures, from troubled backgrounds, and with special behavioral or emotional needs.

I read this and think: I need this book NOW! My family life could improve – hope rises.

I am nearly always at the front of the line for more training concerning parenting. I do not believe that I will ever have too much understanding of issues in parenting, nor do I believe that there is a single way to parent all

children. There are approaches that work better with some children than with others.

The Connected Child arrived at my house at a time when I was near the end of my rope. I was repeating the same ineffective approaches to dealing with my son all of the time. They did not work on Monday, or Tuesday, or Wednesday, but Thursday found me trying the same old things (loss of privileges, time outs, and some ineffective ranting and raving). We needed help and we needed it NOW!

On the book jacket Carol Kranowitz (author of *The Out-of-Sync Child*) calls *The Connected Child* "a must-read for all families striving to correct and connect with their children." I think, I have to read this book, and quickly!

The book is written in a non-technical, chatty style. I got enthused early on and read straight through from cover to cover. This book is about parent child interactions in their entirety, with a table of contents that makes it easy to find the particular parenting technique you are interested in.

I began implementing some changes in my parenting as I was reading the book. Eye contact moved to the front burner. Shawn and I had some difficulties making eye contact ev-

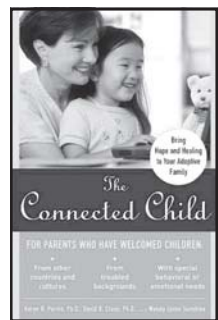
ery time. I cringed as I realized just how far our relationship had to go.

I began to stop and take three deep breaths before reacting. By the end of the first day, the kids were paying much more attention to this than I ever imagined. I accidentally took four deep breaths rather than the three I had been taking and they told me, "Hey, that's four breaths!" I was calmer and they were more responsive.

This is a book I highly recommend. The price is \$16.95 for a paperback copy. The techniques I have tried with my 5 and 7 year old became effective once they realized this is how I will respond now. I don't successfully follow through every time, but I am getting better and my family is happier most of the time.

Suggestions?

What are you reading? Know books, magazines, or DVDs others might find useful? If so, contact me (becky.burmester@mindspring.com, 919/870-9968). Keep reading!



A reader asks ...

Question: *I am adopting an 11-year-old girl from foster care. While in care she has had sporadic contact with her maternal grandmother, who used to be her primary caretaker. Should I consider maintaining contact with this woman following the adoption?*

Children adopted from foster care can face an assortment of complex feelings as they transition into their permanent home. In particular, children may feel overwhelmed with conflicting feelings of loyalty. On the one hand, children may desire a permanent family who can love and care for them, but this desire may also come with guilt, since it excludes the birth family. Children in foster care also have difficulty making the transition to adoption because they continue to worry about the welfare of their birth families.

Promoting an ongoing relationship with her grandmother may help your child resolve or reduce issues of loss, grief, and abandonment. This contact will allow your daughter to maintain an important attachment and relationship. Through this relationship, your daughter may be better able to develop and maintain positive relationships and trust with others in her life. Depending on the situation, the grandmother can also help the child make the transition to adoption if the grandmother supports the placement. This support can help the child overcome the feelings of disloyalty and promote continuity. The maternal grandmother can also add to the circle of support in your daughter's life.

Contact with her family of origin can also help your child develop her identity. When children do not have information about their birth family, they often create a fantasy family. Although the reality of the child's background and birth family may be painful and difficult to accept, it is better to resolve the child's losses with truth than with fantasy. Birth family contact can help the child accept that the birth family could not adequately meet the child's needs, which can help her accept adoption.

Ongoing birth family contact may help your adopted child to forge new, healthy attachments in her life.

This birth family connection can also give your child exposure to her racial and ethnic heritage. The connection to the grandmother may allow your child access to her history, which is not always available for children in foster care. This history can include the child's physical and mental health, as well as information on the birth parents. This information is invaluable and will help you meet the child's needs.

If you wish to explore this connection, you will need to assess parameters such as frequency and type of contact. Contact can include letters, e-mail, phone calls, or personal visits. You will also need to consider whether supervision of contact is needed and how to help your child should she act out as a result of the contact. Your child should not be forced into visiting with her grandmother, and contact should not be encouraged if it turns negative. If age-appropriate, talk with your child about these visits. Specifically, these talks should center around helping your child prepare for those uncomfortable situations or questions that may arise when interacting with her grandmother. As with any situation, it is also important to help your child come up with a safety plan. A key element to maintaining contact with the grandmother is her ability to accept a changed role in the child's life.

Ultimately, maintaining birth family contact should be focused on providing for the needs of the child and the child's best interests. This connection can help your daughter with the development of her identity through accepting the realities of her past. This healing may allow her to forge new, healthy attachments in her life.

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

If you have a question about foster care or adoption in North Carolina, send it to us using the contact information found on page 2.

If “40 is the new 30” by Jeanne Preisler

Reflections on Helping Teenagers in Foster Care

“40 is the new 30.” You may have heard the phrase before. It’s mentioned on TV when discussing how great Demi Moore or Sarah Jessica Parker look, and I’ve seen it on magazine covers while I wait in line at the grocery store. There is even a “40 is the new 30” bracelet you can purchase online.

But why am I writing about this in *Fostering Perspectives*, you ask? Good question. My friend just said it to me the other day and it got me thinking . . .

If 40 is the new 30, this actually has implications for us as foster and adoptive parents. You see, it would be logical to continue that pattern: 30 is the new 20 and 20 is the new 10. Well, maybe not 10. But certainly most 20-year-olds today are not exactly the same as we were when we were 20 years old.

This is especially true for youth in foster care. If they fell behind academically while moving from foster home to foster home, our youth may still even be in high school at 20 years old.

Implications for Fostering and Adopting Youth in Foster Care

When your agency asks you to foster or adopt a teenager, what they are really asking is, can you help prepare this young person for adulthood? Can you do that knowing that there is a chance they will turn 30 before they are really ready to move out on their own?

I know it’s pretty crazy to think about. But I speak from personal experience. My girls are 26 now and have lived with me on and off ever since they became “adults.”

Although they are currently living on their own, they are in college and still need as much support as they did when they were 18. In so many ways, they are much wiser than I was when I was 20-something. But in many other ways, they’re still learning.

* * * * *

Two years ago SaySo’s Nancy Carter advised readers of this newsletter that:

For every move a young person makes in the substitute care system (including the first move from their biological family), assume they lose one year developmentally and academically. Therefore, a 17-year-old who has experienced 5 moves may respond emotionally and behaviorally much like a 12-year-old.

She may very well be right. The challenges of raising teenagers are difficult enough, but they are difficult *and complex* when you talk about raising teenagers from the foster care system.

Take the fictional Benton family, for example. Mr. and Mrs. Benton adopted Blake when he was 14. That was four years ago. Last year they adopted Jason, age 17. Both boys are 18 years old now, but Blake is more mature than Jason and is several years ahead of Jason educationally and emotionally.

Mr. and Mrs. Benton have to parent these boys very differently. It’s not always easy.

Adopting Teens = Youth Homelessness Prevention

In New York, there is an agency devoted entirely to finding teenagers permanent families. The thing is, they don’t call it foster care or adoption. They call their program a “Youth Homelessness Prevention Program.”

Did you know that up to 50% of youth in foster care become homeless within the first 18 months of becoming emancipated? And that 27% of the homeless population has spent time in foster care?

In the light of these alarming statistics, it is clear that we need your help. We are asking you to help prevent homelessness by caring for a teenager, knowing that he or she may not be ready to leave your home until his or her twenties.

I don’t mention these things to scare you. I just want to arm you with information so that you can discuss it with your family and help us recruit more parents to work with our young people. Parenting teens is tough, but with support from your community, your agency, and your foster and adoptive parent association, you can make a difference that will be felt for generations to come.

A Powerful Reminder

There is a great video that ABC did, “Aging Out of Foster Care,” that I highly encourage you to watch. You can find it at <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=2033650>. This presentation is a good reminder that all teenagers, even after they turn 18, long for a family. After watching it, please share the link with people in your e-mail address book.

You never know – someone you never expected might be ready to prevent youth homelessness. This video may be just the thing to get them started.

Start Small

If you are interested but nervous about working with teenagers, start small. Ask your agency if there is a teen who needs a mentor and spend time with this child once a month. Ask your agency if you can provide respite care for a teenager once a month. You may be surprised at your abilities.

Everyone Can Help

If, after becoming a mentor to a teenager and providing respite a few times for one, you decide it is not what is best for your family, you can still help. Make it your mission to recruit one person to become a foster or adoptive parent each month. Talk to your agency about how you can help their recruitment efforts for families who will work with teenagers.

Together, we can prevent homelessness and build better futures for all young people.



Report Finds Increase in Teens “Aging Out” of Foster Care Without a Permanent Family

A new report by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative reveals that although the total number of children in foster care nationally has been decreasing, the number of youth who leave foster care because of their age has been increasing. In 2005, more than 24,000 youth left foster care at the age of 18 without a family of their own. This is a 41% increase since 1998.

On average, those who age out of foster care will have spent nearly five years in the system at the time they “emancipate” without ever having been placed with a safe, permanent family of their own. In total, more than 165,000 youth aged out of the system between 1998 and 2005.

The report, *Time for Reform: Aging Out and On Their Own*, includes information from all 50 states.

To read *Time for Reform*, go to http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/docs/ageout_report.pdf

According to the report, 7.5% of the children who left foster care in North Carolina in 2004 did so by aging out.

Some youth aging out of foster care face a grim future. Researchers have found that:

- One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.
- Over one-fifth will become homeless at some time after age 18.
- Approximately 58% had a high school degree at age 19, compared to 87% of a national comparison group of non-foster youth.
- Of youth who aged out of foster care and are over the age of 25, less than 3% earned their college degrees, compared with 28% of the general population.

Griefwork in the child welfare system

by Deborah Weising

Wordless grief. The kind that goes so bone deep there are no words to express it, nor can anyone else say anything to comfort it. That grief is the expression of so many of those involved with the child welfare system: children, foster and adoptive parents, child welfare professionals, and of course birth parents.

Why does this system that seeks to offer hope for at-risk children and families end up being such a place of grief?

Children and Foster Parents

Foster parents enter the system with a dream: to provide a home and family for a child who is traumatized. Foster families frequently have a background that includes a childhood grief that allows them to identify with that painful, angry, lost look in the eyes of children in foster care. Some families hope to adopt and have been through the deep grief of infertility, or lost children through tragedy. But the common thread that links most foster parents is the desire to answer the grief cry of so many children.

Yet as foster families get more deeply involved with the child welfare system, they find it fragmented, with constantly changing workers and guardians ad litem. They face the daunting task of navigating their own emotions, the impact of fostering on other members of their family, and the stress to their own support system. It can be a confusing, angering experience. Fostering doesn't come with an easy-to-read road map.

Deeper mysteries occur in foster families, too: the child's grief and their own unresolved grief can collide into strange family dynamics. The child's deep pain and loss of their birth family runs in waves through the child's being. How can a child settle into a foster home when his or her identity and sense of worth are tied to the birth family? Children are not given a road map to foster care, either.

"Shared parenting" is the term used to describe the foster parent's role of caring for children while supporting their connection with their birth parents and the goal of reunification. Yet when the child goes home the foster parents' pain can be intense, particularly if they hoped to adopt the child or if they are concerned the child's birth family is not equipped or committed to the child's welfare.

What can foster parents do when they find themselves struggling after a reunification? Grieve with courage. Take solace in the fact that you make a difference in the lives of children and families. You have acted for the good of our most fragile children and families.

Ultimately, foster parenting is the work of love and the decision to stand for the good of others in a very messy human system.

Engage in the work of grief. Ultimately, foster parenting is the work of love and the decision to stand for the good of others in a very messy human system. It is natural to feel sad, angry, disappointed, and con-

fused. That is the work of grief. It's the soul's process of seeing the truth. And the truth is that advocating for children and families can be a sacrificial calling that may never make sense to those who insist on avoiding pain. But as you work through the grief, also reclaim your strength, talents, goodness, drive, and charity. You are wiser and stronger now, and your heart has grown fuller.

Adoptive Parents

When children are adopted they bring their entire experience, heredity, and grief into the adoptive family. It can be a long, hard, costly battle for all members of the family to regain balance.

Unfortunately, adoptive families need more support and training than is available through social services, and frequently deal with children whose emotional issues are beyond the family's understanding or ability to handle.

The good news is, you can often find the resources you need within the adoption community itself. Adoptive families have begun to organize web communities, support groups, prayer groups, and associations that genuinely tackle the deeper issues of adoption. But you have to be willing to reach out and connect! Be willing to share your experience and issues with other adoptive families. Be willing to strengthen your marriage, look at your losses, and reaffirm that adoption is a viable option for healthy families.

Grief, rage, depression, resolution: all these phases can help adoptive families reaffirm their identity, their own health and worth, and their desire to love children regardless of whether they ultimately adopt. And for those who do adopt, the pain involved is an invitation to press through those deep adoption issues that force us to relate to others in a real, non-defensive, vulnerable way. Adoptive family networks are places of healing, advocacy, help, education, and action to make a difference in our world.

There Is Hope

Ultimately, this is a message of hope. If you are grieving, dig deep. There is hope in the same heart that is motivated to help, love, build community, and validate the worth and dignity of human life.

Foster parents must acknowledge that their

work requires a huge support network, deep abiding faith, skills to recognize when they need help, and the ability to accept that some important things connected with foster care are beyond their control. Foster families get involved, get a big helping of grief, and then have to decide if the lives and welfare of children are worth their own personal pain.

Of course children's lives are worth it: but never underestimate the cost. Foster parents will hopefully build a support system with other foster and adoptive parents that is much deeper than social services. Government cannot be our sole support system, sole source of training, and solution for the issues we encounter. We become the solutions by going much deeper, and refusing to let children be forever without a family or home. Foster families also have to gain wisdom about the needs of their own families, and understand and test their own motivations. A life calling is often a call to overcome pain in our early lives and become a helping hand to others.

Caseworkers quit in droves. But their skills are so needed. Dig deep. Creativity will come not from the top ranks of government, but from the grassroots workers who have seen firsthand the brokenness and needs of individuals and families. Rethink! Reinvent! Social services, more than ever, needs partnerships with nonprofits and faith communities. Have you considered writing about your experience, or organizing research and experimental models? Don't throw away your insight and experience, get busy and use it!

What about the children? They count on all of us to rethink the idea that government solutions are effective apart from community solutions. The faith community in particular is most likely to tackle the breadth of issues affecting the destruction of families and children.

Where do we start? Start by wiping the tear from the face of an injured or forgotten child, or encouraging a single parent who is spiraling into homelessness, or lend guidance to someone with an addiction, or vote for those who are committed to life-affirming policies. Enter the depths of grief, and come out with a love that is tough, real, ready to allow for pain, and never gives up. The resolution of grief that has no words is the decision to love beyond pain. Look in the mirror: are you there yet?

Deborah Weising is a child and family advocate, nonprofit consultant, and motivational speaker. She can be e-mailed at weisingd@yahoo.com.



SaySo prepares for a ROYAL celebration by Nancy Carter, ILR, Inc.

SaySo members will have their BIG day in a castle.

Yes, a real castle! No...we are not headed to Disney World. We'll be in Jamestown, North Carolina, at Castle McCullough. Traditionally known as a wedding venue, Castle McCullough is diversifying their services. As they open their doors, (excuse me)...lower the drawbridge, on Saturday, March 8, 2008, we will gather to celebrate the 10th anniversary of an organization many thought would never come to be: SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out).

On that day, SaySo's members and supporters will revel in the fact that it has not only survived but **thrived** throughout the years! In fact, it has never been stronger or healthier. Today, with over **400** youth members, **11** local chapters, **14** youth board members, two staff members, and the ability to hire six alumni as SaySo Regional Assistants we can say with confidence... SaySo is here to stay!

10 Years of Speaking Out

Flash back ten years. In spring 1998, a group of youths interested in speaking out and some adults interested in hearing what they had to say came together in Burlington, NC. This was the birth of SaySo.

For those that remember, there were some significant obstacles to starting SaySo, including the fact that the public in general finds teens difficult (at best), the transitional nature of foster youths offered challenges in providing consistency, and adults were afraid of what foster youths would say if given the chance.

Well, since 1998 SaySo youths have had many chances to speak their minds! They have proven themselves to be part of the solution – not a group of whining, complaining young people. This monumental occasion of SaySo's 10th anniversary signifies to SaySo members and adult supporters that:

- Foster youths do matter
- Their ideas can solve problems
- They have talents to offer, and
- Their voices can make a difference not only for them but for future generations.

Corporate sponsors are being sought to help offset the cost of this 10th anniversary celebration. Interested individuals or businesses may contact Rhiannon Galen, SaySo Program Coordinator (800/820-0001, sayso@ilrinc.com) to request a sponsor packet. Visit <www.saysoinc.org> for more information about this event.



In March 2008 we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of an organization many thought would never come to be.

Program Coordinator

SaySo now has a full-time Program Coordinator. Her name is Rhiannon Galen. She has a BSW from East Carolina University and recently received her MSW from UNC-Chapel Hill. Prior to working with SaySo, Rhiannon provided both residential and mentor services to teens in foster care. We are so pleased to have her full-time dedication to SaySo and her eagerness to help the organization grow during the next ten years!

Get Involved!

As SaySo prepares for this big anniversary, foster parents are asked to consider how they can encourage their teens and previous foster youths to get involved. Our new website (redesigned July 1) provides the opportunity for youths ages 14 – 24 to sign up. Users will be able to view the popular “For You” video, learn about resources for foster teens, participate in safe online conversations (monitored by SaySo), register for events, receive six annual newsletters (past issues are archived on the website), participate in polls, connect to other links, and so much more.

Reaching Out to Alumni

Alumni are an important SaySo asset. Whether they were previous SaySo members or not, adopted or aged out, alumni offer real life advice and support to current youths. Since July we have had alumni “Come Home to SaySo.” After aging out these young people have found SaySo to be a place of welcome.

SaySo is currently recruiting alumni to be part-time, paid SaySo Regional Assistants, whose job it will be to help with the development and growth of SaySo. Visit the website for a complete job description.

Kesha, one of SaySo's founding members (she who wrote SaySo's “belief statement” ten years ago) recently found the site. She was proud to see how the organization has flourished. Kesha also participated in the recent orientation for new board members and provided a concrete example of the shoulders our current youth leaders stand on. SaySo has a rich history and is adding to it every day.

SaySo Happenings!

In addition to our 10-year celebration, SaySo is busy with the following activities:

1. Completing an educational presentation to support foster youths to maximize the academic success.
2. Finishing the “For You” guidebook to accompany the video. Both resources will be given to members at SaySo Saturday and will be “downloadable” from the website.
3. Facilitating a LINK UP youth conference for teens ages 13 – 15 on Saturday, January 26, 2008 in Greenville at Pitt Community College.
4. Supporting legislation to make SaySo Saturday a state holiday.
5. Participating in the state Program Improvement Plan.
6. Coordinating SaySo Survivor 3 (April 2008).
7. Coordinating SaySo Page week (May 2008).
8. Participating in and presenting at national youth conferences.
9. Raising money through the Food Lion Shares program.
10. Making a difference for young people all over North Carolina.

For more information on SaySo activities, events, and resources visit <www.saysoinc.org>.

SaySo is a busy organization. By using technology as a way to find and connect with our young people, SaySo is stronger than ever. In fact, we're on the move just as much as our members! If you'd like to support SaySo but you are not quite sure how, call us (800/820-0001). We've got a million ideas.

I Improved

By Steven, age 16

I improved
As I moved
From place to place
I looked in the mirror at my face
And I noticed I needed to change
And I rearranged
The truth was coming out
And I started learning what I was about
I was smart and that was just the start
I had to tear apart and go inside
And find the things I used to hide
And do away with my pride
As I cried
And told my life bit by bit
And here I sit
In the seat of my life
Going down the highway avoiding
Roadblocks and straying debris



Steven received \$15 for having his poem published.

Fostering teens and their children

by Becky Burmester

Over the course of fostering nearly 80 children (many newborn infants whose mothers made adoption plans) and serving as a foster parent for infants of incarcerated women, my husband and I decided that we might have a greater positive impact if we fostered pregnant and/or parenting teens.

No one tries to be an inadequate parent. However, most people parent as they were parented. For years I suffered from undiagnosed depression. I remember well that when a therapist identified untreated depression as requiring medication as well as talk therapy, I complained that living my life was like playing monopoly without knowing the rules.

Many children and youth in foster care are living lives without understanding the rules. Younger children and teens without children face obstacles in daily living, but teen mothers in care are doubly challenged. Having experienced less than ideal parenting, they are poorly prepared to parent but must now parent under the critical eye of social services and the court system.

How can foster parents best meet the needs of both the teen parent and her child?

After she had lived on her own for two years, one of the young mothers we had cared for told us that what meant the most to her when she was in foster care was having someone who always believed in her and expected her to do well, someone who “had her back.” Another young mom we know believes that being asked if she would like some help with her baby is important.

Here are several things that guide my husband and me as we foster teen parents.

Be Mindful of the Learning Curve

The moms may very well NOT know better. No one can do well those things with which they are totally unfamiliar. Some child rearing techniques have to be observed to even make sense.

Anticipate (and Accept) Differences

There are ways to nurture a child safely that are different than the ways I might do things. There are wide variances in what is acceptable parenting. I am not a perfect parent. Neither will a teen mom be a perfect parent. Our goal as foster parents is to develop moms who are “good enough” or “better than good enough” parents.

Shared Parenting, and Then Some

Most foster parents in North Carolina are familiar with the concept of “shared parenting.” Fostering teen moms and their children is the absolute demonstration of shared parenting

Teen moms in foster care are often poorly prepared to parent. How can we as foster parents help them?

24/7. This is 52 weeks a year, not once a week for an hour or two. Handing down rules and regulations is not an effective way to improve parenting skills. Demonstrating without saying “this is how it should be done” allows the teen to see

interactions and to internalize them. The desired changes don’t happen overnight. Every day is not a good day. But teens can learn to provide good care for their children and to enjoy their children.

Teens Will Be Teens

Teen moms are children themselves. As such they will, upon occasion, act immaturely. They **are** immature. As foster parents of young moms one of our roles is that of grandparent. We provide a break from parenting and help teens make safe plans for time away from the responsibilities of single parenting. We also model break times from children in our own lives. Some time alone or with friends or spouse is healthy and makes parents better able to cope with the demands of raising their children. If alcohol or substance abuse were the coping methods of choice in your family of origin, the idea of getting a sitter and going to see a movie or hanging out with friends might seem foreign.

Placing Moms and Babies Together

Currently in North Carolina there is a big push to place sibling groups in a single foster home. I believe that it is just as important for teens to be placed in the same foster home as their children. Research shows that the long-term outcomes are better for young moms and their children placed together.

The right foster home is very important. The foster parents of parenting teens should not have any desire to adopt an infant or young child. Such a desire would present an incredible conflict of interest (e.g., “if this mother

fails, we could adopt this child”). The foster family must be willing to acknowledge shortcomings and failures. The indicators of a strong family are not how much they do right but how they deal with their mistakes. Teens need to see how mistakes can be remedied.

Placement Should Be Warranted

I wish that county DSS workers were less quick to take both teen mom and her child into custody. Teens abhor having their children in the custody of DSS. Provided the foster parents are willing to supervise the young mom and her child, the young moms could be encouraged to succeed and to demonstrate that their children do not need to be in the custody of DSS. If a teen in a functional family gives birth to a child, the child only enters into DSS custody in the case of abuse or neglect. If positive outcomes for both teen mom and child are the desired result, placement together with only the teen mom in DSS custody would seem the best approach.

If you currently foster teens or are thinking about fostering teens, my husband and I would like to encourage you to explore caring for teens and their children. The babies and toddlers are a joy, but nothing can compare to the feeling you have as you watch a young mom and her child interact appropriately and have fun. This really is the opportunity to change the future. Young moms tend to stay in contact with us after leaving care. Shared parenting has built a level of trust that encourages the moms to reach out for answers to questions and for help making decisions.

Resources for Learning More

- <http://www.clcla.org/facts_teens.html>
- <<http://youthadvocacycenter.org/pubs/reports.html#caring>>
- <<http://www.nyclu.org/search/node/The+rights+of+pregnant+and+Parenting+teens>>
- <<http://www.healthyteennetwork.org>>

A Bridge In Time

Ronda, age 15

walking down a long lonely path time is frozen.

I come upon a worn-out bridge sitting there without even a drop of water under it or a tire tread leading down!

Now I come here to think about frozen times and to find myself!!!

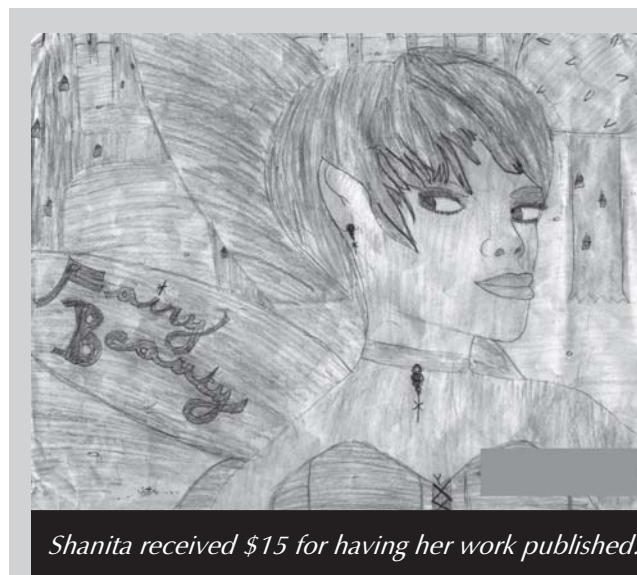
to search for today, tonight, and tomorrow

until I see the clouds slowly move!

and I realize time isn't frozen just

this bridge in time!

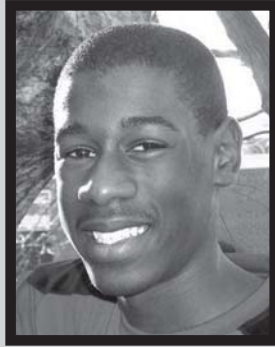
Ronda received \$15 for having her poem published.



Help us find families for these children



Angie



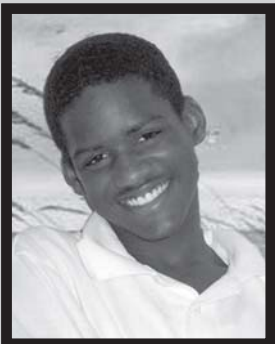
Hikeem



Brittany



James



Dabrock



Jazlyn



Dustin



John



Emily



Maria

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

Angie (age 17)

Angie is a bright and helpful young woman who likes to please. Once she feels comfortable, Angie gets along well with others. Angie is a very pleasant girl. She loves children, so her desire to become a pediatrician makes sense. Angie likes being active and enjoys cooking, playing on computers, and volleyball. (NC #083-2140)

Brittany (age 14)

Brittany is a very likable and attractive young woman with beautiful brown eyes. She recently had her hair cut into a short, "more grown-up" bobbed style. Brittany can be extremely insightful and has an unbelievable thirst for life. She loves animals and she is a terrific gymnast, but she also loves knee boarding, riding her scooter, and swimming. (NC #073-2331)

Dabrock (age 13)

Once he gets over his shyness, Dabrock has a terrific personality and good manners. His favorite activity is taking things like cars and trucks apart and putting them back together in different ways. Dabrock is very adventurous and would love to explore the Sahara Desert. He dreams of joining the army or becoming an astronaut or inventor. (NC #060-2568)

Dustin (age 13)

Dustin is a playful, loving, and caring boy with the biggest heart you can imagine. He loves to read and enjoys watching auto racing. Dustin has a talent for and an interest in drawing. He loves animals and has lived on several farms where he enjoyed helping care for them. Dustin wants to become a biologist so he can protect endangered species. (NC #049-1947)

Emily (age 16)

Emily is a beautiful girl with soft blue eyes and a fabulous smile. She is caring, conscientious, and friendly, as well as cooperative, sociable, and a self-starter. Emily conveys her thoughts effectively through her writing and she enjoys keeping a journal and writing poetry. Emily attends regular classes at school where she has made amazing progress. (NC #090-2748)

Hikeem (age 15)

Hikeem is a capable, bright young man with strong verbal skills. He has leadership qualities if he channels them. He can be a caring and considerate child. Hikeem enjoys riding his bike, reading, and roller blading. He enjoys tinkering with cars and would like to become an auto mechanic. Hikeem made the A/B honor roll four times last year. (NC #090-1132)

James (age 12)

James has a very giving and sweet spirit and seeks positive attention. He likes sports and would like to play on a team. James would love to learn to swim and play the guitar. He is quite inquisitive and likes to see how things work by taking them apart and putting them back together. He is very good with his hands and enjoys making art projects. (NC #029-2756)

Jazlyn (age 15)

Jazlyn is a determined and responsible teen. She is usually fun and cheerful and enjoys talking to people and being helpful. Jazlyn's three loves are writing poetry, dancing, and fixing hair. She enjoys going to the movies, roller skating, cheerleading, and stepping. God and church are important to Jazlyn and she relishes all of the activities involved. (NC #013-2771)

John (age 14)

John has an extremely good imagination and can entertain himself for hours. He enjoys NASCAR, riding his bike, building things, and playing outside. When he is comfortable, John can become quite friendly and open. He loves to talk about dump trucks, fire trucks, and tractor trailers. John wants to be a construction worker or truck driver. (NC #060-1883)

Maria (age 12)

Maria is a delightful, happy, and hopeful girl who loves to smile and laugh. She is also verbal, polite, and pleasant to be with. Maria is active and athletic and she plays several different sports. She is an avid reader and musically talented. She enjoys attending church, summer camp, and participating in activities at the local YMCA. (NC #029-2845)

Life then, today, tomorrow

by Ronda, age 15

Life then was scary, today
great, tomorrow will be perfect with
mom and dad by my side.

Life then was a burden, today
a blessing, tomorrow calm with
mom and dad teaching me!

Life then was chaotic, today
thought out, tomorrow calm with
mom and dad teaching me!

With mom and dad
by my side
life tomorrow will be better
than today
and never like life then!

Ronda received \$15 for having her poem published.



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

Writing Contest

If you are under 18 and are or have been in foster care, we invite you to:

Interview your foster or adoptive parent about why they chose to be a foster or adoptive parent and what it's like to be one.



FIRST PRIZE: \$100
SECOND PRIZE: \$50
THIRD PRIZE: \$25

To help you, we have posted some interviewing tips online at <www.fosteringperspectives.org/interviewing-tips.pdf>

Younger children are welcome to submit artwork on this theme/topic as well.

Deadline: February 11, 2008

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

We're Also Seeking Artwork and Other Writing Submissions

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

Get in-service training credit for reading this newsletter!

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

In-Service Quiz, FP v12#1

1. Name two ways foster parents can benefit from participation in child and family team meetings.
2. Describe the new North Carolina law that creates funding to support post-secondary education for some children who spend time in foster care. Who benefits from this law? Be sure to name three things this funding pays for.
3. When and where will the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association's 2008 conference be held?
4. Describe how you and the foster parents you know will be affected by the recent changes in the rules governing foster home licensing in North Carolina.
5. What is the book, *The Connected Child*, about?
6. In state fiscal year 2005-06, what were the chances that a teen in foster care in North Carolina was placed in a non-family setting (that is, in group or institutional care)?
7. Describe the potential challenges and benefits of maintaining connections between children adopted from foster care and their families of origin.
8. What organization will be celebrating its 10th anniversary at Castle McCullough on Saturday, March 8, 2008?
9. Name three strengths and three needs identified by federal reviewers during North Carolina's recent Child and Family Services Review.
10. Name five things foster parents can do, when working with children who have been sexually abused, to address troubling behaviors and make children feel safe.

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Why Is Adoption Important to Me?

by Michael, age 8

It is important because I want and need a good and safe family. Where I used to stay was not that safe. I like my new safe home and my new safe adoptive family. The special part of my family is that I have two moms, and that makes my brothers and I have a lot of love.

There are seven people in my home: 2 moms, 4 brothers, 2 dogs, and me. I like my new big family. My old family was not safe because there was a lot of fighting.

When I first came into foster care I felt OK. I thought was being babysat. I liked the new house, the new people, the new school. I didn't like seeing the people I used to see. I felt sad and mad.

When I realized I might not be going back [home] I felt sad. I did things to misbehave. I did and said things to scare my foster moms. I even tried to hurt their feelings and get them in trouble. That is when I realized they loved me—because they didn't send me away to another home.

This is new for me, and they are working with me. Although I had never lived in another foster home, I knew I loved them, too. I told my social worker that I didn't want to leave.

When I finally heard I was staying I felt happy, great, excited, calm, motionless. The day I was fighting against had finally come. I was shocked but yet very happy to have a forever family.

Michael received \$15 for having his essay published.

When I realized I might not be going back [home] . . . I did things to misbehave. That is when I realized they loved me—because they didn't send me away.