

fostering perspectives

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

North Carolina needs foster families for teens

Earlier this year the North Carolina Division of Social Services surveyed public child welfare agencies in our state about recruiting and retaining foster parents. Sixty-eight of North Carolina's 100 county departments of social services responded.

One of the chief concerns they raised was the shortage of foster homes for teens. As a group, the 68 responding agencies said they would like to see about 1,200 additional foster families for adolescents.

Assessing the Need

On the one hand, this is not surprising if you consider that teens are disproportionately represented in residential placements in our state. For example, in state fiscal year 2006-07, 21% of youths age 13 to 17 were placed in group homes when they first entered DSS custody, compared with 6% of children age 6 to 12 and 1% of children age birth to 5.

Yet if you consider the number of homes and the number of youth in care, agencies' desire for more homes makes less sense. At the end of February 2008 there were 10,543 children in DSS custody in North Carolina. That same month, our state had 7,129 licensed foster homes.

Looking at these numbers, it would seem that North Carolina has more than enough foster homes to care for every child in foster care, including teens. Why are agencies saying we need more?

Unused Homes

The desire for additional homes for teens makes more sense if one understands that not every foster family in North Carolina is currently being used.

This is something we have in common with other states. For example, in her study of administrative data on use of foster homes in Oregon, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, Gibbs (2005) found that in these states 20% of the foster parents provided between 60% and 72% of all foster care days. Gibbs' finding is in line with the conclusion reached by Stukes Chipingu and Bent-Goodley (2004), who found that at any given time on a national level, one out of every three licensed foster homes is unused.

There are many factors that determine whether a foster home is used, including the number of children in the agency's custody, the relationship between the foster family and the agency, the fit between the foster family's skills and abilities and the needs of the children in care, and the foster family's stated preferences.

This last factor is something over which foster parents have a great deal of influence. In general, the more restrictions you place on the type and number of children you are willing to care for, the longer you will wait for a placement. For example, if you limit yourself to infants, it may be quite some time before an infant is taken into custody.

While you are waiting for a

A Teen's Perspective

In our most recent writing contest we asked young people what they thought about the fact that some teens live in group homes simply because there aren't enough foster families that will take teens. We also asked what they thought would change the minds of these reluctant families. Here's the winning entry.

My name is Ariel, but most people call me Ari. I'm 16 years old and I'm proud to say I'm going to be a senior this year.

[Although I'm in foster care] I'm a regular teenager. I have lots of friends who are in foster care as well. We like to go to the mall and shop, go on dates to the movies, and talk on the phone. I love my friends.

No, my life is not perfect, and I've been through a lot. But I think that's what makes me who I am today: young, talented, independent, smart, and sweet.

So why are foster parents so reluctant to take in teenagers like me? Since I can remember, teenagers in foster care have been talked about as being bad, disrespectful, out-of-control. All these words and many more have been used to describe us.

My opinion is not that foster parents are so reluctant to take us in, but that people have talked down about us so much that foster parents who want to take us in or give us a chance suddenly have a change of mind. So if people would stop giving us such a bad rap and stop dwelling on our weaknesses and look at our strengths, more people would be willing to take teenage foster children in their homes.

*Ariel's was awarded \$100 for her first prize entry.
Turn to page 3 to read other contest entries.*

I'm young, talented, smart, and sweet. So why are foster parents so reluctant to take in teens like me?

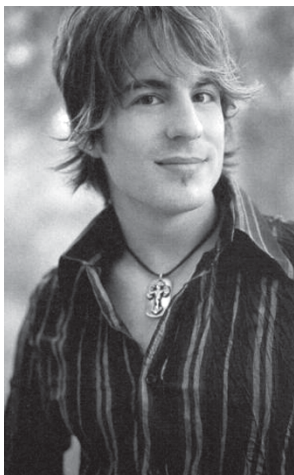
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placement, the children who **are** in care—and right now one out of three youths in foster care in North Carolina is over age 13—must be cared for by someone. For teens in particular this can mean placement in a group home, even though policy says children should be placed in the most family-like setting possible.

You Can Help

You became a foster or adoptive parent because you want to make a difference in the lives of

children and families. Teens in foster care need you to take action on their behalf. Talk to other foster parents to make sure they are aware of the need for homes for teens. Take a moment to reflect on your own situation and stated preferences. Social workers need families that can accept and work with all of the children that come into care. So many of them are adolescents—won't you consider opening your home to teens?



Jimmy Wayne: NC foster care alumni makes it big

North Carolina-born Jimmy Wayne had his first number one hit this September, when "Do You Believe Me Now" reached the top of the Billboard country singles chart. Called one of country music's "Next Big Things" by *USA Today*, Wayne has won the attention of national media and the devotion of fans.

Although he says he is now living his dream, Wayne's early life in Gaston County was anything but ideal. His father left the family before he was born. His mother spent time in prison. Wayne went into foster care at age 8, eventually becoming separated from his sister. He says he moved around in the foster care system quite a bit.

At 16 he was homeless, living outside, and trying to earn money for food. Then, he was taken in by an older couple. While they never received any stipend or agency support,

the couple had a history of taking in children who needed a home. According to Wayne, their kindness changed the trajectory of his life and made possible all that he has achieved.

In much of his music, Wayne draws attention to children living with abuse, neglect, and poverty. You can hear excerpts from some of these songs, such as "Paper Angels," "I Love You This Much," and "Kerosene Kid," at www.jimmywayne.com.

Jimmy Wayne comes back to North Carolina to help children in need and the agencies who care for them. Since 2006, he has returned to do an annual benefit show for the Cleveland-Rutherford Kidney Association. Youth in area group homes receive free tickets to the show. This August, he took a break from his touring schedule to share his story with DSS social workers at an annual conference.

He spoke with *Fostering Perspectives* in September 2008.

An Interview with Jimmy Wayne

How have you transformed your experiences, and in particular painful episodes from your own life, into music that inspires other people?

I think that really just telling the truth, you know, and saying things that people can relate to is where it begins. And I think it's just songwriting. Instead of writing a commercial song that I think might get played on the radio, I write songs that may not ever get played on the radio but to me, they have a lot of truth and a lot of meaning behind them. And, you know, I think when people hear those songs, those are the songs that move them the most.

Can you talk about the folks who provided a home for you? What do you think it was about them that made a difference for you?

They just didn't give up. I mean, first of all, they gave me the chance of a lifetime. They were in their mid-70's, and there I was, kind of a long-haired teenage boy, needing a home. And they gave me one. They made me cut my hair and go to church. You know, those were the rules. They didn't know anything about me. They just took a chance. I sometimes wonder if it was some kind of divine meeting or something. It's insane really.

How did you actually meet them?

I was cutting their grass, doing odd jobs around their house. I don't know why she asked me to move in, I don't know how she knew anything about me.

What would you say to foster parents or people considering becoming foster parents?

You're really just taking a chance every time that you go out and help one of these kids. But to me it would be worth it. Just take a chance, you'll never know. I'm so glad that family took a chance on me. They're 100% responsible for me and my success and everything that's happened to me today. [It] is all because of that family.

Are there any messages that you would give to foster care workers?

Well, there's so much to say. I mean as far as not giving up on those kids, knowing that they will remember everything that they say to them. I still keep in touch with one of my foster care social workers, Carla Foy, who stood by me relentlessly and helped me through those hard times. [She] and

her husband are still great friends of mine. So they never know. They might end up helping someone and getting a lifetime of free, backstage VIP passes.

In North Carolina we're really trying to help kids maintain ties with their birth families. How has that worked out in your life, maintaining your family ties while living with other people?

Well, I've never been in a situation where I had a family that wanted anything to do with me, so I don't know what that feels like. I've had foster parents who've helped me, but my own family never really cared and still don't care.

One of your songs, "Stay Gone," actually came from something your sister said about her ex-husband. Is that your birth sister?

Yes. She's my sister that I was in the foster homes with when we were kids. There was a lot of separation. She got married at a young age, to escape all that stuff. She married a guy who was abusive and just ended up feeling like he owned her. And I went and got her out of that situation one day.

How were you able to maintain that connection with her over those years?

I didn't. I didn't maintain it. We were split up and stayed split up for a while.

Is there anything you'd say to children in care?

Well, I mean, it's not really the kids that I would want to talk to, it's the people that can make a difference in their lives. I mean, we can talk to the kids till we turn blue in the face, but they need our help for a reason. Because they can't do it on their own. If they could, they wouldn't need our help. I mean, not that I don't care, because Lord knows I do. It's just you get tired of talking to them and the adults not doing anything about it.

To the kids, if there was anything I could say to them: find something that they really enjoy doing, and stick with it. You know if it's music, stick with it, if it's any kind of sports, or anything, find something that they enjoy doing, and go after it.

The dream's not that far away. It wasn't for me. I went after it and got it. It's there, all they gotta do is just go after it. It can be done.

Somebody has to do it. Why [shouldn't] it be the chosen people to do it? We're chosen people. We

experience these valleys in our life for a reason. Why shouldn't they go after it? We're stronger than the ones who have never experienced anything.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I did an interview the other day, and they asked me about religion and how that played a part. And it played a major part, because of that family. You know, they lived by the Word. And the Word says "True and undefiled religion is to help the widows and orphans in their time of distress." And if statistically, there's more Christians than there are kids who need help, well, apparently, the Christians aren't doing their job. I mean, the math just doesn't make sense. There should not be any kid out there who's left behind.

Excerpts from "Paper Angels"

Lyrics by Jimmy Wayne

After every day-after-Thanksgiving sale the malls
just ain't complete
Without a bunch of decorations and
a paper angel tree
There's artificial smiles on artificial tree limbs
Saying what she'd love to have and what to buy
for him

[Chorus:]
Paper angels you're in my thoughts and prayers
No matter where you are right now remember
God's right there
He's asking all of us to help take care
Of his paper angels everywhere

His documented bruises fill a folder file
She's a 2nd grade self-portrait drawn without a smile
And every town is littered with this kind of debris
We've got to stop this madness and it's up to you
and me



Kids' Page

Words and Pictures by and for Children in Foster Care

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Advice for foster parents reluctant to care for teens

In the last issue we asked young people what they thought about the fact that some North Carolina adolescents live in group homes simply because there aren't enough foster families that will take teens. We also asked them what they thought would change the minds of these reluctant families. Here's what young people in foster care had to say.

—John McMahon, Editor

Note: The essay by the first place winner in the writing contest can be found on page one of this issue of Fostering Perspectives.



Katie, age 15

I'm not surprised by the fact that many teens in foster care live in group homes. When I first came into foster care, I was living in a group home . . .

The world is full of skeptics and overly cautious people. You know, there is not necessarily anything wrong or bad about that. It's just those kind of people don't like uncharted waters. And come on now, a teenager with a separate background that you know nothing about and have no control over whatsoever is definitely what I would call uncharted waters. . . .

What I think would put these people's minds at ease a little is if DSS would inform them more—share a little bit of background [about] what kind of kid they are, do they get in trouble a lot, you know, stuff like that. [Provide] the facts and a little more, to kinda give these parents a look at what these kids are like. The [foster] parent and the foster child should most definitely meet and get acquainted.

Katie received \$15 for having her essay published.

I'm not surprised many teens in foster care live in group homes.

Carrie, age 12

In North Carolina . . . [some] teens have to go to group homes [because] most foster families would rather have young kids than teens. I feel sad knowing that the teens will be placed in group homes . . .

The minds of foster families could change by trying to know more about teens and then take classes about teens.

Carrie received \$15 for having her essay published.

The minds of foster families could change by trying to know more about teens.

Shelby, age 16

Knowing that there aren't enough homes for teenagers is really sad because I was once in that situation. Coming from my real mother's home to a group home hurt me so bad because I thought no one cared . . .

I think that if people (families) saw what these teenagers go through every day they might change their minds about what they should do to help them feel like they belong and are loved. My other suggestion is to have [foster families] spend a day in a foster home or group home where the caregivers just don't care. Maybe then they will change their minds.

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

If people saw what these teenagers go through every day they might change their minds about what they should do to help them.

Mylieng, age 18

If I could say one thing to foster families it would be, yes, children need a lot of attention and nurturing, but we teens need someone to believe in us. We need someone to love us unconditionally and to dare us to dream. We need adults to take us in who are wanting us to make the best for ourselves and who will place high expectations on us so we can get somewhere with our lives.

All we need is a jump start. It's like teaching a baby to walk. We need adults to hold out their arms for us, just in case we fall. As soon as we get used to walking, then those adults would know they had done their jobs as loving parents. Foster families such as these can save us from the streets and save us from destroying our lives and wasting our God-given talents . . .

Every single human being on this earth has a gift but we need guidance as young adults to learn where our talents can take us. In my opinion, that all begins with love. . . .

My aunt loves me dearly and she always tells me how proud she is of me, which keeps motivating me to do my best. She loves me as her own daughter and she always pushes me with school and my best talent of all, writing. She knows I pour my heart and soul into my pen. Writing was my only escape from my cold childhood. I can pour my heart into my pen without it getting broken in the end. Her dream for me is to prove my mother wrong. She wants to see me make something of myself and to one day see my mother regret the way she has treated me. She, unlike many other aunts, dares me to dream. I believe with all my heart, if we had more foster parents like her, many of us broken teenagers would be healed. I believe all of us would be saved through love, and that we would all be able to carry on with our lives in a positive way, not afraid to carry our bruises and scars from the past. We would all be able to live out our dream that is buried deep within our broken hearts.

Mylieng's essay won third prize, for which she was awarded \$25.

If I could say one thing to foster families it would be, yes, children need a lot of attention and nurturing, but we teens need someone to believe in us.

Building a positive relationship with birth parents



Donna Foster

Foster parents are taught about the things children feel when experiencing loss. We are taught in MAPP about the grief cycle and how to help children through each stage. Yet we are not always taught that birth parents go through their own grief cycle. This is critical information—before we can hope to build a relationship with the birth parents we need to understand how they are feeling.

To give foster parents the tools they need to build more constructive relationships with birth parents, I'd like to share the following suggestions, which are organized according to Charles Horejsi's ideas about the cycle of birth parent grief (see sidebar below).

Stage: Shock

At this stage of the grief cycle birth parents need to know their children are being taken care of by kind people who are not trying to replace them. No matter what caused their children to be placed outside their home, parents still care about their children and feel they should be in their care. Foster parents can help by meeting the birth parents face-to-face when children are being placed with them. If a meeting is not possible, call the birth parents after the children are placed. During meetings and phone calls foster parents should:

Start the conversation. Do not say "I understand how you are feeling." This could anger birth parents who feel no one can understand how they are feeling. A better approach would be to introduce yourself by

Tips to help you engage, motivate, and support birth parents as they learn to parent their children in healthy ways.

saying, "Karen, I am Donna. I am taking care of your child until he can come home to you. He is missing you. I felt you wanted to know who was taking care of your son."

Be ready for serious anger.

Do not let angry words stop your compassion. The birth parents have lost control over their

child. They are at a loss as to how to fight for themselves. Demonstrating that you understand this frustration is a first step in the development of trust between the adults.

Stage: Protest

The birth parents may let the foster parents know in no uncertain terms that they are their children's only parents. They may threaten the foster parents not to harm their children. This is a method of trying to maintain control. Here are some ways foster parents can strengthen their relationship with protesting birth parents:

Assure birth parents you will not harm their children. Birth parents benefit from hearing these words from the foster parents. They may have heard or read scary stories about foster parents.

Be humble. Let the birth parent be the knowledgeable one when talking about their child. Example: "You know your child better than anyone. How do you want me to care for your child while he is here?"

Understand the birth parent's anger as an expression of grief. Do not show your own anger. Instead, show compassion. This can be difficult if the children have been

neglected or abused. Your feelings are your own and should not be overlooked. But as foster parents, you must remember the child loves his or her parents. The plan is almost always reunification. Use your own feelings to motivate and support the birth parents as they learn how to parent their children in healthy ways.

Use Reflective Listening. Birth parents need to be heard, not judged. Reflective listening is the practice of repeating or paraphrasing what the person you are talking to has just said, reflecting back the emotions you are hearing. Example: "I hate that my children are staying with strangers!" Reflective response: "You sound worried that people you don't know will not know how to care for your children."

Foster parents' role is to listen and to provide creative ways for the birth parents to actively parent their children. When they do this, Shared Parenting is taking root.

Don't sell yourself as wonderful, superior, or the child's salvation. Birth parents may feel embarrassed or threatened by the foster family's home. Birth parents may believe foster parents are in it for the money. Birth parents need to hear from foster parents that they are here to help families reunite. Birth parents need to hear again and again that their children need them and that material things aren't important.

Stage: Adjustment

After birth parents feel recognized by the child's foster parents they become more open to being involved in the parenting of their children while they are in foster care. Here are some specific ways to communicate to birth parents that they are included in their children's care.

Ask birth parents what questions they have for you. Birth parents may want to know: Do the children have a room by themselves? Who bathes them? What do you tell them about why they are in foster care? How do you let them know we love them? When can I talk to them? Are you going to change them so that they are more like your family? Do you want to keep our kids?

Ask birth parents about their children. Ask questions such as: How do you want us to take care of them? What do your children like to eat? What allergies do they have? Are they allergic to any medications, mold, animals, etc.? What fears do they have? What do you do to calm them? What do they need with them at bedtime, such as special

cont. p. 5

Birth Parents' Grief Process

Shock. Parents are in disbelief. The words people are saying don't sink in or make sense. Parents feel like they are sleepwalking. The only thing on their mind is that their child is gone. Behaviors of parents may include: shaking, screaming, crying, or swearing. They are overwhelmed with worries about their child. Parents may promise the social worker anything without understanding what they promised. Parents may be in denial and are sure the child will return tomorrow.

Protest. Grief shows itself more physically. The parents may feel sadness or anger and the symptoms could be upset stomach and low or no appetite. Parents may have headaches, insomnia, and exhaustion. They may be angry at everyone. The parents may make demands or threats. They may swear or cry for no apparent reason. It may be easier to blame others for the situation than to accept their responsibility. This could be a way of coping with despair and depression.

Adjustment. In the adjustment phase things start to settle down. Adjustment occurs sooner if the parents have an ally, such as the social worker and foster parent. The parents do not worry about their children's safety or loyalty if trust in the foster parent has developed. The child becomes the focus of the team. Those assisting the birth parents can be the social workers, foster parents, guardian ad litem, therapists and other community resources. The parents build their parenting skills and actively participate in co-parenting their children with the foster parents. The social worker, foster parent, and birth parent develop a strong Shared Parenting team. The parents fulfill their obligations and meet the case plan goals.



Photo Illustration

Adapted from Charles Horejsi's "Working with Biological Parents"

continued from page 4

blankets, pillows, stuffed animals? What are their school needs? Are they close to any teachers, bus drivers, or other family members? Who are they? What do you want the children to call us?

Develop an action plan for parenting the children together. When questions are answered you can, in collaboration with the children's social worker, develop an action plan that might include phone calls, family-oriented visits at the agency, at parks, and in time, at the foster home. Birth parents can join their children and the foster parents at medical appointments, school activities and meetings, church functions, community activities, birthdays, holidays, and summer activities.

When the birth parents are attending these functions, foster parents should introduce them as the children's parents and ask doctors and school personnel to discuss their children's needs with the birth parents. This helps the birth parents practice parenting and allows foster parents to play a supportive role.

After Reunification

If shared parenting is practiced, the self-esteem of the birth parents is heightened and a positive, ongoing relationship with the foster family created. After reunification the birth parents will most likely desire a continued relationship with the family who cared for their children. The foster parents can offer to take the roles of aunt, uncle, and cousins. They can offer to give respite to birth parents by occasionally caring for the family's children.

Reunification is stressful. The support of the foster parents can help the family succeed in staying together. Staying involved after the children return home also helps foster families with their own emotions.

A slow transition is healthy for all of the children and the adults who love them. Everyone wins!

Donna Foster, an author, national trainer, and consultant, lives in Marshville, NC.

Encourage Social Workers to Attend Shared Parenting Course

The NC Division of Social Services offers a 2-day course for county DSS child welfare social workers that teaches them how to support partnerships between birth families and foster (and kinship) families. Social workers can learn about class times and locations and register for this free training at <www.ncswlearn.org>.

Winning Him Back by Lynne Miller

My visits proved I was worth my son's trust

The First Visit

When my son arrived at the agency where I was impatiently waiting, I didn't recognize him. When they took him from me, he had a long tail and hair to just above his collar. Now his hair was shaved in sort of a mushroom cut.

When I was told, "There's your son," I think I went into shock, and my son and I spent nearly the whole visit crying all over each other.

Maybe it was the guilt I was feeling, but I felt I could see the mistrust in my son's eyes. I didn't know how I would be able to win back the trust I had stupidly forfeited.

He Called Someone Else 'Mom'

The worst part of the visit was when I heard him call the foster mother "Mom." I flipped out. After the worker and foster mom calmed me down, they explained to me that it was to make him feel at ease, and because her other foster kids called her that too.

They tried to reassure me that I still was and would always be his mom. But here was my son calling some other lady "Mom." I felt sure this was just another proof that my [child welfare] worker was making good her threat to keep my child from me. . . .

His Foster Mom Supported Me

I came to know my son's foster mother and she made our visits go easier and helped me get my son back. My agency has a family to family approach—that is, we try to keep open communication between the birth and foster parents so that a friendship can develop.

This lets the children know they aren't a prize being competed for; they are loved and cared for and have just acquired an "extended family" to help take care of them while their birth parents are unable.

My son's foster mom would assure my son that he'd be going home someday soon. She even had the agency's psych department give my son therapy to help him with all the new and confusing feelings he was having.

Starting the Healing Process

Still, seeing my son for one hour every two weeks took a toll on our relationship. I felt like I was in a bad dream that I was moving through in slow motion.

I no longer knew how to act or what to say around him. I tried to make it up by bringing "things" to every visit. But then I would wonder whether he was happy to see me or the gifts. The worst part was saying goodbye after every visit. That's when all the guilt and remorse really set in. I wanted to kick myself for being such a screw-up.

I think my showing up consistently for our visits started the healing process. It helped to show my son that I could be trusted again. If I told him I would be at the agency to see him in two weeks, and then I



Illustration by Elizabeth Deegan

showed up, he knew I was reliable and kept my word. It also showed the agency that I was capable of being a responsible parent again.

Eventually, our visits were increased to one hour once a week, and then two hours every week. Finally, I was able to take him for an occasional overnight, then weekends.

My Son Comes Home

Having my child overnight again created new tensions and stresses for both of us. He wasn't real sure how to act with me; I worried about saying the wrong thing or losing my cool. But I just took it minute by minute, and eventually we began to have a natural relationship again.

You can't know how wonderful it is to be able to just call your child in from the backyard to eat dinner until you've experienced not having him there to call. I found most pleasure in the smallest things; wiping away a tear, kissing a booby, or just getting a hug.

The best Christmas present I've ever gotten was when I was told I could have my son for his Christmas vacation from school. That became his trial discharge home to me. After almost 18 months of hard work, I got him back!

Ups and Downs

My son has been home almost three years. We still have our ups and downs. He still occasionally acts out in school and every once in a while he has a bad nightmare, like he did after he was taken away from me.

I am in the process of trying to find a therapist for him that I can afford. I think it's important because the feelings he experienced while I was using drugs and then when he was in foster care aren't going to disappear just because we're a family again. My son and I talk to each other about what happened and how I hope he will believe me when I tell him it will never happen again.

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NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

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

We're working for you—and getting results!

by Stacey Darbee



Stacey Darbee

From the Association's President

The NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association is a voice for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents in North Carolina. Our mission is to promote quality foster and adoptive services through collaborative advocacy, education, resources, reunification, and networking. We partner and advocate with others in the field of child welfare.

There are over 12,000 potential members of this association. We need your support to make sure your voice is heard. Join today!

Here are a few things we're doing to benefit you and children in foster care in our state:

2009 NCFAPA Training Conference

We are excited to announce that the theme of our 2009 training conference will be *Awakening the Aloha Spirit...Changing Tides, Changing Lives!* We feel that the Aloha spirit (affection, humility, perseverance, unity, harmony) really signifies what is happening with our Association and with foster and adoptive families in North Carolina.

The conference will be held May 1-3, 2009. **SAVE THIS DATE NOW!!** Need more motivation? The Aloha conference will be held at the Renaissance Suites in Charlotte. Every room is a full suite! Reservations are \$99 a night! Refrigerator & microwave in each room! All meeting space on one floor in one building!

Together we
can achieve
anything.
Join us today!

It's never been easier to make your hotel reservations: go to www.NCFAPA.org and pick the "Reserve Your Room Now" option for Renaissance Charlotte Suites. You will be directed to a site set up specifically for our event.

At the upcoming conference we will offer 40 workshop sessions with information for everyone from new foster and adoptive parents to extremely experienced ones. Games, an amazing luau, awards, and fantastic surprise entertainment: all planned for you. The focus for 2009 is **fun** in a setting that provides the best quality training.

Registration will be free with your paid 2009 NCFAPA membership. If you join or renew your membership by December 31, 2008 your name will be put in a drawing for 2 free hotel nights in Charlotte during the conference. This event is better every year. Don't miss it! Go to www.NCFAPA.org for conference registration information.

Seeking Nominations

At the conference each year NCFAPA honors parents with regional awards for Foster Parent of the Year and Adoptive Parent of the Year. In 2008 we also instituted a state award for each of these categories. Nominations are now open. **ANYONE** can nominate someone they believe exhibits the ALOHA SPIRIT! Nomination forms may be found

and submitted on our web site. You all know someone who deserves recognition for what they do everyday—**NOMINATE!!**

Advocacy: Great News!

NCFAPA, along with strong support from the Covenant with NC's Children and CFSA-NC, advocated throughout the year for a reimbursement rate increase. And we got it! On July 16, 2008 Governor Easley signed House Bill 2436, which included the largest increase in the Foster Care Room and Board Reimbursement Rate and the Adoption Assistance Rate in state history. Beginning January 1, 2009 the rates will be as follows:

New Reimbursement Rates Starting January 2009

Child's Age	Current Rate	New Rate
birth to age 5	\$390	\$475
age 6 to 12	\$440	\$581
age 13 to 18	\$490	\$634

NCFAPA Board of Directors

NCFAPA would welcome inquiries from members interested in joining the Board of Directors. Please contact Gregg Childers at Secretary@ncfapa.org for more information.

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Though we are currently undermanned, the NCFAPA Board has accomplished a great deal. We will continue to advocate on behalf of foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Join forces with us today!

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., 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 for an individual and \$75 for a couple. **Associate Membership** (\$100 for an individual and \$300 for an organization) is available to those who do not qualify for Regular Membership.

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When a child must move

by A Foster Parent

Being a foster parent is full of firsts. There is the first child that becomes part of your family, the first child that returns to his or her birth family, the first child placed with birth family members who are strangers to the child, the first time you say no to a proposed placement.

And then there's the first time a child needs to leave your home to move to another foster home.

A Traumatic First

My husband and I have been foster parents nearly forever (over 20 years and counting). Our family has experienced countless firsts, but none has been harder than our most recent first. For the first time, two foster children (a youth and her toddler age daughter) left our home for new foster placements. To say that we are passionate about foster placement stability would be an understatement. Our mantra is "If this were our birth child, what would you be recommending?"

It wasn't that these youngsters arrived at our home and it just did not work out. They lived with us and completely shared our lives for 18 months (the young mother) and 20 months (the toddler arrived at 5 months of age).

What went wrong? Was it even wrong? How do we regroup from this experience? What could we have done differently? And, finally, what will we do next time?

Our Perspective

Let me back up. Being a foster family requires ongoing education and support. The support has to be provided by other foster parents. Only foster parents have "been there and done that." They don't think you were crazy in the first place to have opened your lives to strangers.



To say that we are passionate about foster placement stability would be an understatement.

We have taken multiple workshops dealing with grief and loss. We absolutely understand that socio-economics has nothing to do with being able to be a wonderful parent. Our own two adopted children (one an open adoption and one a closed adoption) are daily reminders of the incredible importance of birth family connections no matter the cause of the placement. Yes, I know that a child sexual molester can never have unsupervised contact with the child, but even so, to ignore that relationship is to harm the child. Being in protected contact with those who have hurt them can be

very healing at some point to children in the foster care system.

My husband and I struggle more when children are placed with relatives with whom they have had little or no contact for the vast majority of their lives. Sometimes it seems to us that establishing an ongoing relationship with the relatives and placing the child with the foster parents as adoptive parents might be better for the mental health of the youngster. Attachment can be a very fragile thing.

Out of the Blue

But, then comes our recent first. The young mother had a planned, temporary move to a higher level of care so she could focus on mental health issues. The toddler was going to stay with us, with frequent visits with her mother. Then it all went so confusingly wrong. The mother decided she could not spend even one more night in our home and she bounced from home to home while waiting for her therapeutic placement to be finalized. The young mother told the judge that

she did not want to be placed in the same home as her daughter until she was 18 (12 months in the future). The judge, knowing that we did not consider adopting the toddler an option due to our age, told all of the parties to the case to return to court at the next scheduled hearing with a concurrent plan in place. We supported wholeheartedly the need for the toddler to move to a home where she could grow to adulthood **if** her mother was not going to be able to regain custody. There was a transition period for the toddler, but at this point, a month and a half into the placement, things seem to be going very well.

And what about the mother? What would we have wanted to have happen if she had been our birth child?

In Hindsight

We second guess ourselves, wondering what would have been the best course of action. We feel that she should have been receiving much more intensive mental health services than she was prior to leaving our house and that she is receiving even now. Perhaps family therapy for the entire foster family—my husband and me plus our two children and the mother and her child—would have offered all of us emotional support and things to do as a family that might have stabilized the situation. At the time the mother stated she could no longer stay in our home, we were rather blind-sided. Family therapy might have allowed issues and feelings to be shared so that the family unit could have remained intact.

Foster parents are truly a work in progress. Every child is different. Their needs are different, their responses are different. Yet we must try our best to care for each one as though they were our birth child.

To protect the confidentiality of the children described in this essay, the author has requested to remain anonymous.

Family Support Network of NC

Promoting and providing support for families with children who have special needs

- Does your child have special needs?
- Do you need help finding information, resources, and services?
- Do you want to know more about a special need, disability, or diagnosis?

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- ¿Su niño tiene necesidades especiales?
- ¿Usted necesita ayuda para encontrar información, recursos y servicios?
- ¿Usted desea saber más acerca de alguna necesidad especial, discapacidad o diagnóstico?

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Serving families since 1985 through a network of affiliated local programs

The Starfish

As the old man walked the beach at dawn, he noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea.

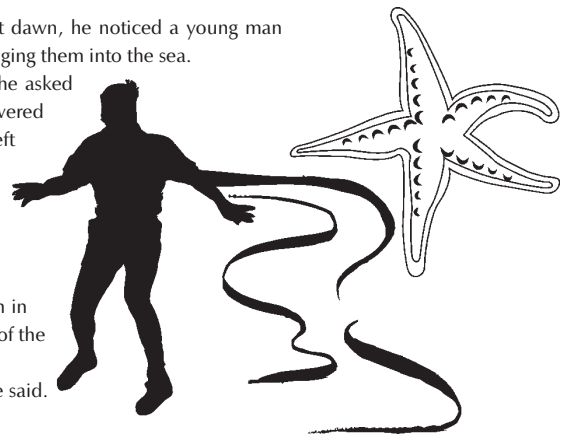
Finally catching up with the youth, he asked him why he was doing this. The boy answered that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun.

"But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish," countered the old man. "How can you make a difference?"

The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to the safety of the waves.

"I made a difference to that one," he said.

—Anonymous



Family secrets: Sexual abuse is common but often hidden

While few children enter foster care solely because of sexual abuse, studies suggest that foster youth are twice as likely as other children to have experienced sexual abuse, whether at home or since entering the system. Lisa Lubell, director of the Child Sexual Abuse Education, Evaluation and Treatment Project at Lawyers for Children, talks about why:

The number of children in foster care who have been sexually abused is high. There are many reasons for that. But basically, children whose parents are unable to care for them, or who are not living with their biological family, are vulnerable to being preyed upon.

Alone and Afraid

In biological homes where there's neglect, the parents may not be too focused on the child because they're so involved in their own struggles, whether it's with mental illness, substance abuse, or sometimes just survival. A parent's lack of focus on the child, or lack of connection, can make the child more vulnerable to sexual abuse because an abuser sees that the child is not protected. The parents may also not pick up the signs that something is wrong.

Older kids sometimes come into care because of acting out behaviors that their parents can't handle, and underlying those behaviors is sexual abuse that the kids haven't told their parents about. Common behaviors are running away and symptoms of trauma that look like acting out, such as suicidal behaviors, self-cutting, aggression, fire setting, sexual behaviors (such as excessive masturbation or sexual play in younger children, or having many partners in older children) that are considered too advanced for their age or unacceptable to a parent.

Usually the abuse was by a relative or someone who lives in the home—abuse is most commonly committed by people the kids know—and the kids have a real fear of disclosing the abuse to their parent. Kids fear that their parent's loyalty will be to person who abused them, or they feel ashamed, or they've gotten a silent message from their parent not to talk about this kind of thing. They also fear the consequences to the rest of the family if they

were to tell, and they feel they need to protect their family. But their behaviors show the abuse.

Kids can also be abused in their foster homes, where they become accessible to a variety of adults—including group home staff or older children in the home—who sometimes will take advantage of a kid they think is powerless. Many times children in foster care really do feel powerless and isolated, so they don't speak up. Some are so desperate for connection and relationship that sexual abuse seems to give them the attention and nurturance they crave, even though it is actually abusive. It's a tragic consequence of the system that doesn't make them safer.

Teen girls in care also are particularly vulnerable to getting into relationships with older men or getting drawn into prostitution or other kinds of sexual exploitation. That can happen because early sexual abuse puts them at risk of developing sexually inappropriate relationships, and also because in care they may live in environments, like group homes or residential centers, where it seems that girls are really preyed upon by older males.

Once in care, kids with sexual abuse histories also are more likely to be moved from placement to placement, because foster parents and caseworkers often misinterpret behaviors that are the result of the trauma, and become punitive towards kids for behaviors that the kids may not have control over.

A Family History

Finally, many birth parents of children in foster care have experienced sexual abuse in their own lives. That can be an underlying reason why birth parents might get depressed or turn to drugs. When parents have never opened up about their abuse, or weren't believed if they did, they learn a pattern of not allowing themselves to believe that it happened and

could happen again. They also learn a pattern of protecting the family from the system or from looking bad, instead of responding to the child's needs.

Sexual abuse is devastating, and has painful, traumatic effects on children and their families. It can seem too painful and shameful to believe. So it's natural to react by saying, "This can't be happening," and shut down against believing it, even when you know the truth. As difficult as it can be to support a child when she comes forward, it's so important for parents to validate a child's experience, report the abuse to a professional, and help the child recover.

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

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

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Photo Illustration

The Things I Wish I Had Done

by Ronda

Screaming and running	No longer feeling love for you
Hiding and fighting	Dropping all things in spite of you
<i>The things I wish I had done</i>	<i>The things I wish I had done</i>
Cursing and hurting you	Craving no more your
Yelling and hitting you	Sinful love
<i>The things I wish I had done</i>	That fit me like a beat up glove
	<i>The things I wish I had done</i>
Telling but telling it all	Laughing at you
Not just the small	Seeing you lose
Parts to make it disappear	Your trial and life
<i>The things I wish I had done</i>	Just like I did with
	So much strife
Making you pay	<i>The things I wish I had done</i>
Making you meet your doom	
Seeing all lonely and gloom	Forget you now
<i>The things I wish I had done</i>	And move on for good
	And for once having a
Crying no more when I saw	Stabilized mood
Your face	<i>The things I wish I had done</i>
Or meeting you unknowingly	
At a public place	Just to spite you
<i>The things I wish I had done</i>	Gramps just to spite you and see you
	Lose so much like me
Seeing you die	Lose it forever and never gain it back
Or maybe cry	
A single tear	The things I wish I had done
<i>The things I wish I had done</i>	



Books on the nightstand

Book reviews by Becky Burmester

I am still reading, but much more slowly. At age 60, I have decided what I want to be when I grow up, and so have started back to school. I've read that students in the community college system tend to be older than just out of high school, but you sure couldn't prove it to me looking at the students in my classes! I am the class great-grandparent. Textbooks are just as heavy both to carry and to read as they were 40 years ago.

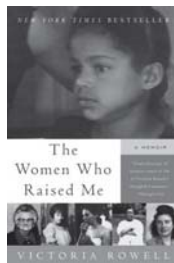
Recently I have read a couple books that should be required reading for foster parents and for foster youth. Let me tell you about them.



Surviving the Storm

Surviving the Storm: the Life of a Child in Foster Care by Julia S. Charles is a wonderful book in a small package. Tipping the book scales at fewer than 100 pages, one might think it was a lightweight. To dismiss this book because of its brevity would be to squander the opportunity to really see things through the eyes of someone who has been part of the "system" and triumphed. Julia Charles carries the storm

analogy throughout the book, including the dedication. Joe and I have been foster parents to several young people who are now out on their own, making it, but just barely. The "girls" are all getting a copy of this book in their Christmas stockings this year. It is short enough that they will read it (perhaps more than once), real enough that they will know that the author has "been there," and inspiring enough that they may think of Julia Charles at one of those times when everything seems just too hard.



The Women Who Raised Me

This work by Victoria Rowell differs from most of the books that I recommend in that it is a book that truly is about the women who raised her. My book club, which reads books by African American authors, chose this book for our August book discussion. This is the book to read if you are asking yourself whether you are making a difference. I like to think that I am a strong advocate for young people sharing our home, but

Agatha Wooten Armstead was a force to be reckoned with. There were many important women in Victoria Rowell's life but none as determined as Agatha Wooten Armstead.

Rowell's memoir contains more information about the women in her life than about her own life. Members of my book club speculated that the author had not yet dealt with some of the issues in her past. Two members flatly stated that this book was a fairy tale. They simply could not relate to Victoria Rowell and the life she described. Only three of our eight members finished the book. Following the discussion one member said that she was going to finish the book; the others were turning it in and starting on something else.

People in this group know me as a foster parent. Claudia said that, except for this book and knowing Becky, she had never heard or read anything good about foster parents. For me, that moves it into the category of books my non-fostering friends **ought** to read.

I need to end this and hit those textbooks. What's on your nightstand? Share what you are reading with me! You can reach me at 919/870-9968 or becky.burmester@mindspring.com.

SaySo takes it on the road by Nancy Carter

Here's an quick update on the activities of your favorite youth advocacy group, Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo).

Road Show – Connecting the State

SaySo Board members want to bring the mission of SaySo to local programs. SaySo's mission is to improve the substitute care system by educating the community, speaking out about needed changes, and providing support to youth who are or have been in care. By presenting to local groups of caregivers, prospective adoptive parents, future social workers, foster youths (who can't always attend SaySo programming) and policy makers, SaySo board members hope to reconnect with alumni, create more local chapters, and support change in local communities.

To make this happen, SaySo needs to know which organizations or schools are interested in sponsoring a short SaySo forum. Sponsors will need to cover costs required to bring board members to the area. Several groups can jointly sponsor a forum. If you are interested, e-mail sayso@ilrinc.com with information on location, suggested times, and targeted audience.

Orientation – A New Decade Ahead

In June, previous and newly elected board members joined for a three-day team building retreat at Sandhills Community College. They helped each other overcome amazing obstacles and learned more about SaySo and their roles as board members. They created a year-long plan to determine their priorities, planned the 2008 summer LINK Up conference in Winston Salem, and made arrangements to present at the National Independent Living Association Conference in Orlando in September. Events involving SaySo to be held in 2009 include another LINK Up conference in January, SaySo Saturday in March, and SaySo Survivor IV in April. The year will culminate with SaySo Page Week during foster care month (May 2009). The coming year will be an active one as a new decade of SaySo begins with a dedicated board of young people.

Local Chapters – A Way to Be Heard

To improve substitute care in North Carolina, youths need to be heard at the local level. As part of our state's Program Improvement Plan (PIP), directors of county DSS agencies are being asked to listen to

programming suggestions from older youths. To contribute to this process, SaySo will help "jump-start" local chapters' involvement as sounding boards for DSS directors. SaySo members are asked not to whine about the problems but to become part of the solution. This philosophy makes a local chapter an asset to any area and a natural vehicle for improving services. For more information on how to start a chapter or to request a youth speaker to assist a local chapter, contact Rhiannon Galen (800/820-0001; sayso@ilrinc.com).

Website – A Place for Information

SaySo website www.saysoinc.org has more than just SaySo information. It has ways to register for statewide youth events and information for older teens and alumni. For instance, there's information on how to prepare for further education, employment, a section for youths to post their poems and stories, and numerous links to important information. If you have suggestions, send them to us at sayso@ilrinc.com.



Confidentiality and the foster parent's need to know by Joan McAllister

To successfully protect and promote the well-being of the children in their care, foster parents need information. Yet sometimes foster parents are uncertain what information they can reasonably expect to receive when children are placed in their homes. To clarify this matter, we thought it might be helpful to review some of North Carolina's policies related to confidentiality and information-sharing in child welfare.

Protecting the Child and Family's Right to Privacy

North Carolina General Statute 7B-2901(b) states that information contained in social services' records of children in protective custody is confidential, and that, in the best interests of the juvenile, such information should be protected from public inspection. These records may only be examined by order of the court; the exception to this rule is that the child's Guardian ad Litem (GAL) and the child him or herself has the right to see these records. This information is protected because of the child and family's right to privacy. Policy limits the sharing of information regarding children in foster care based on that individual's **need to know** the information in order to administer foster care services.

In order to care properly for a child being placed in their home, foster parents, relatives, or other foster care providers do need to know as much information as possible regarding the reason for the child's placement and the needs of the child. Confidential information specific to the family's struggles should not be shared unless that information has an impact on the child.

The Role of Shared Parenting

Shared parenting meetings are a way of sharing vital information about a child with the foster parents. During these meetings the social worker, birth parents, and foster parents meet and discuss the care of the child when out-of-home placement is necessary. The meetings provide birth parents with an opportunity to share valuable information about the care of their child with the child's foster parents. Sharing information about things such as the child's favorite foods, toys, sleep patterns, and behaviors helps foster parents care for and comfort the child.

Shared parenting meetings also provide foster parents with the opportunity to share information about themselves and what they have observed and learned about the child in their care. During these meetings, plans can be made regarding visitation, medical

appointments, school meetings, transportation, and the like. As foster and birth parents get to know one another, birth parents' anxiety and speculation about the welfare of their children can be put to rest. In their place familiarity, trust, and sometimes even friendship begin to develop.

Foster Parents' Rights

Foster parents always have a right to receive the following from county DSS agencies:

Placement information.

Information about why the child is in foster care and what the primary and concurrent permanency plans are must be provided to foster parents at the time of placement and updated as needed to help the foster parent anticipate and respond to the child's needs. Providing this information also helps the foster parent to be an informed partner in the planning process.

Social/behavioral information must be shared with the foster parent/caregiver at the time of placement, including information about the kinds of behavior the caregiver is likely to encounter and the parental responses that seem to be the most helpful to the child. The child's strengths and abilities should be shared along with any needs. Once this information has been passed along, foster parents and caregivers are responsible for keeping social workers and other members of the team informed about changes in this area.

Medical information must be shared with foster parents at the time of placement and updated as information is received. The foster care provider needs to know of any

The *Health Status* and *Educational* components of the *Family Services Agreement* are two important documents North Carolina foster parents should receive whenever a child is placed in their home.

special medical problems that the child may have. Obviously, this includes the child's HIV status. The *Health Status Component* of the Family Services Agreement must be completed and provided to the foster parents within seven days of placement. Also, the child must be referred by the placing agency for a physical examination within seven days of placement. The foster parent/caregiver signs the form to verify he or she has received it.

Educational information must be shared with foster parents at the time of placement and updated as information is received. The foster parent/caregiver shall receive the *Educational Component* of the Family Services Agreement, and signs the form to verify receipt. In addition, the foster parent/caregiver should be a part of any discussion regarding Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) or other remedial efforts to assure that the child's educational needs are met. For further information on this topic, consult "Preparing the Family, the Child, and the Foster Care Provider for Placement" in "Chapter IV: 1201 Child Placement Services" of the N.C. Division of Social Services *Children's Services Manual*. This manual can be found online at <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-10/man/CSs1201c5-03.htm#P37_4471>.

Joan McAllister is the NC LINKS Program Coordinator for the NC Division of Social Services.

What You Must Know about Confidentiality

Foster parents are entrusted with confidential information about children in their care, and learn additional confidential information about children and their families as a result of their work as foster parents. It is the client's right and expectation that confidential information will be respected and safeguarded by the agency. As partners in the provision of children's services, foster parents are bound by the same

expectations of protecting confidential information as are agency social work staff members. This means that no information learned as a result of their work as foster parents is to be shared outside of that professional service, even if identities are "disguised." Casual conversations about client information with friends, other foster parents, and others not involved with direct services to the client are prohibited.



Photo Illustration

Do you have the info you need?

A checklist of the things you should know when a child is placed in your home

At a foster care and adoption training, a group of North Carolina's child welfare social workers were asked to list the information foster parents needed in order to do their jobs well. The things they suggested are listed below, along with a few spaces to add items of your own. Keep this list handy!

- ☐ Names. The child's full name and any nicknames he or she might use, as well as the names of the child's parents, relatives, and siblings.
- ☐ Agency Contact Information. DSS worker name, contact information, and suggestions as to when to contact them.
- ☐ An explanation of why the child was removed from the birth parents and a description of how the child has been disciplined or hurt.
- ☐ Expected length of stay.
- ☐ How long child has been away from birth family.
- ☐ Medical information—history, medications, clinical diagnoses.
- ☐ School information.
- ☐ An assessment of the child's language skills and ability to communicate needs.
- ☐ Religious and cultural beliefs/expectations.
- ☐ Description of any behavior problems the child may have.
- ☐ Information about the child's involvement with school, mental health, doctors, etc.
- ☐ Interests, skills, activities.
- ☐ Favorite and hated foods.
- ☐ Sleeping and eating schedules.
- ☐ Fears (e.g., of dogs) and pet peeves.
- ☐ Clothing and dressing preferences/needs.
- ☐ Visitation schedule.
- ☐ Information about appointments and court reviews.
- ☐ Transportation issues—how will the child get where he or she needs to go?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____



A Reader Asks . . .

How can I help while I wait for a placement?

My husband and I are new to fostering. We've finished MAPP training, completed our homestudy, and we're licensed, but we haven't received a placement yet. What can we do that will help us and the children in foster care while we are awaiting placement?

When you first became interested in fostering, I am sure you heard how desperate North Carolina is for licensed foster homes. While this remains true, your agency's first priority is to find the best foster home for the child, not to find a child for your home. As a result, families sometimes have to wait a while before their home is good match for a child in care. Luckily, there are plenty of things you can do in the meantime that will help you make a difference in the lives of children in foster care. Here are a few suggestions:

Strengthen Your Relationship with Your Agency

Staying in touch with your agency and worker can be important steps in maintaining a successful foster home. If you want to get a taste of fostering, offer to provide respite care. Respite care can be provided over a weekend, for a week, or sometimes over longer periods.

Talk to your worker about projects involving the children in care. Most agencies have recruiters. The recruiters have ongoing activities that they may need assistance with. They are recruiting for new foster and adoptive parents and for local partners to provide goods and services to the children. Contact your agency's recruiter to find out about upcoming events and get involved.

As you strengthen your relationship with your agency, your agency will become even more confident that they can depend on you.

Educate Yourself

One of the most important aspects of being a foster parent is education. You started the process by completing your MAPP classes. While you are waiting for a placement, take time to learn about a subject that interests you.

Most agencies, public or private, offer ongoing training. Contact the agencies in your area to obtain a current schedule and take advantage of them. In most cases you don't have to be licensed by the agency to attend their classes. Once you are on a mailing list or listserv you will continue to get updates about upcoming events.

Remember, each foster parent must have at least 20 hours of in-service training prior to licensure renewal.

Get Involved in Other Community Activities

There are many community agencies that need good volunteers. Some require as little as one e-mail a week. Others require a few hours a month. Listed below are a few programs that need volunteers on a regular basis. This is not a comprehensive list. There may be more programs in your area.

- **Big Brothers/ Big Sisters.** If you can commit to spending 4 hours a month with a child ages 6-18, this program might be for you. Online: www.bbbs.org.
- **Orphan Foundation of America.** This organization has a VMentor program that pairs volunteers with an older teen through regular e-mail contact. Contact Jane O'Leary, Director of vMentor (joleary@orphan.org).
- **One Church One Child.** Along with your church, you can volunteer to provide support to your local DSS. E-mail Jon.Hunter@rowancountync.gov.

These are all programs that affect the lives of children in foster care. By working with them, you are continuing your personal journey of making a difference in the lives of children in foster care.

Join a Foster Parent Support Group

The NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association is a network of foster and adoptive parents with groups across the state that have meetings on at least a quarterly basis. These groups provide ongoing support and information for anyone who looks after children in foster care. If there is no group in your area, consider starting one. Once you have a placement, you will be glad you did! Can contact the Association (e-mail: office@NCFAPA.org) to find a group in your area. Your social worker is also an excellent resource for these groups.

Review Your Plans

Finally, if it has been a long time (more than 6 months) since you completed the requirements for licensure and you have still not been approached by your agency for a placement, spend some time reviewing the plans you made when you first started the process and ask yourself these questions:

- What am I looking for in a placement?
- Are we limited in the number of children we can accept?
- Are we limiting the age range of children?
- Are we open to children with special needs?

Social workers need families that can accept and work with all of the children that come into care. The more ready, willing, and able you are, the more likely it is that you will have a placement sooner rather than later!

Response by Kristin Stout of the 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 8.

Overcoming system failure to help youth find and sustain positive relationships

by Joan McAllister

Despite improvements in foster care, most of us would not want **our** children placed in the custody of a county department of social services. Although foster care placement can be a lifeline, it can also permanently disrupt children's positive relationships.

Too many times, children removed from their homes lose contact with relatives, neighbors, school friends, teachers, pets and others who make up the constellation of their natural support networks. As these relationships are disrupted or broken during the removal process, children are expected to form new relationships in unfamiliar environments—with the foster parent, the new school, the new social worker, the new teacher—sometimes in a new town or at least in a new part of town. These experiences can have a negative impact on children's ability to form and sustain connections to family and other supportive people.

Five Caring Adults

Since 2001 the NC LINKS program has asked counties to focus on achieving seven outcomes for teens in foster care:

- Safe and stable housing
- Sufficient income to meet basic needs
- Adequate educational and vocational training to secure stable employment
- Avoidance of high risk behaviors
- Postponed parenthood until emotionally and financially prepared
- Access to medical care and use of preventive care, and
- A personal support system of at least five caring adults in addition to professional relationships

Evidence suggests that despite our efforts, there is room for improvement. For example, of the 611 young adults who aged out of foster care in North Carolina in state fiscal year 2007-08, we can only be sure that 316 (52%) had a support system of at least five caring adults at the time they left care.

This is not acceptable. If an average group of adults are asked how many people are in their personal support system, most can list more than 40 people.

It's not that people don't care about youth aging out of care: many family members, friends, former foster parents, employers, teachers, coaches, and other caring adults would be willing to be a part of the youths' lives—if they only knew about the need. Youth in foster care need at least the same opportunities as others to gain the supports they need to become successful adults.



Lisa's Story *A Case Example*

This fictional case example illustrates what can go wrong when we fail to help youth find and sustain positive relationships

Lisa will be 18 on Monday. She has been in foster care for three years. She was sexually abused by her stepfather. Her mother did not believe her and stayed married to the stepfather. The relationship between Lisa and her mother was broken beyond repair. Parental rights were eventually terminated. Both of Lisa's sisters have been adopted, but visitation has been discouraged

because of Lisa's "negative influence" on the younger girls. Lisa is angry at her mom, angrier at the stepfather, and angriest at the DSS system. She is in the last semester of her senior year. She has been offered the opportunity to remain in care on a CARS agreement until she graduates, but will not consider it. Lisa and her 20-year-old boyfriend have just taken Lisa's belongings from the group home where she has been living. The couple's whereabouts are unknown.

Support Networks at Risk

For children who, like Lisa in the case example above, are not reunified quickly, the damage caused by removal is often compounded over time. Foster care social workers may not be aware of the relationships that were lost and may not think to ask children about people who are or were important to them. They may rely on information in the child's record, using other social workers' judgments about the suitability of friends and relatives. In Lisa's case, potentially untapped resources from her past include her sisters, their adoptive parents, her paternal relatives, and neighbors.

As youth remain in care, many miss out on opportunities to develop new supportive relationships. For example, some agencies have policies that require criminal records checks before youth in custody can visit overnight with families of friends. Liability concerns give rise to policies that prohibit use of reasoned judgment by foster families. Some agencies refuse to allow youth to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities because there is no approved means

of transportation for the youth to return home, or because they are afraid that something bad might happen. Some youth are not able to attend their home faith community. Some youth are not allowed to work or to volunteer without overcoming many behavioral and attitudinal hurdles. Additional barriers are listed below.

Children entering foster care often lack basic personal supports; were that not true, many could avoid foster care placement or quickly move from foster care into the home of a relative or another caring, responsible adult. Those children who remain in foster care through adolescence face a combination of factors that, if not addressed proactively, are likely to lead to a lack of supports upon discharge.

What You Can Do

The most important thing that we can do for children and youth in foster care is to assure they have a consistent personal support network of at least five caring adults, in addition to those persons whose support is based on a professional

cont. p. 13

Barriers to Building Support Networks

- As a child becomes an adolescent, the biological and sociological need to become a separate, independent adult becomes stronger. Adolescents who have fragile support systems are often not interested in developing relationships with more adults, and lose some of the supports they have during this maturation process.
- Foster care sometimes discourages potential relationships, as in Lisa's situation with her sisters and other relatives.
- Some agency policies discourage youth from becoming involved in the very activities that can expose them to potential supports such as sports, clubs, faith communities, school activities, and employment. These activities may be seen as "frills" rather than as opportunities for growth and the development of resources.
- Social workers are busy people. Youth who are resistant to new relationships with adults can be difficult to convince and engage. Social workers underestimate the impact that they can have on youth when they make time to build trust.
- The names of people who might become support people may be buried in the records, in the information held by the family, or in the memory of the youth. Extracting and acting on this information takes time, effort, and prioritization. Potential resources may have moved away, with current whereabouts unknown.

continued from page 12

relationship. If each of us makes the commitment to youth we serve to help them to identify and strengthen these relationships, we will literally help them survive the normal crises that everyone experiences in the transition to adulthood.

The following strategies are recommended to help youth build their personal support networks:

- Ask the youth the names and contact information of people with whom they would like to re-establish or strengthen contact. With their permission, share information about potential supporters with the youth's foster care or LINKS social worker.
- Be particularly mindful of relatives and siblings as possible resources.
- Give the youth opportunities to invite their personal supporters to their Permanency Planning Action Team (PPAT) or case planning meetings. Don't screen anyone out unless there is a clear safety issue. Try to "screen in" invitees rather than screening them out.
- Make every effort to assure that youth attend their court reviews and that they communicate their plans and interests to the judge.
- Conduct "record mining" in your agency on the ten youth who have the most fragile or non-existent support networks. Talk with the youth about names that are found that might be possible support persons.
- Use both free and for-charge internet search engines to locate missing relatives and friends. Child Support Enforcement may already have access to information that could be used to locate people. LINKS Transitional Funds can be used to pay for searches for potential support persons.
- Keep your expectations, and those of the youth, reasonable. Your intent is to strengthen their support network, not to secure instant placement. If that happens, great—but people can be supportive in many different ways.
- Enable youth to participate in activities that will, among other things, expose them to caring adults. Avoid denying participation in these positive activities as a punishment for unrelated offenses.
- Remember that people can and do change. Immature parents often grow up and may become quite capable of being an adult friend to their young adult children. Stay open to the possibilities.
- Accept the young person's plans for their life and help them develop those plans while they have the resources of the agency to help process what they are learning.

If youth are to have the best chance of transitioning successfully from foster care to adulthood, DSS must make a concerted effort to assure that existing relationships are maintained and strengthened throughout the youth's time in care. We would want nothing less for our children—and these **are** our children. *Joan McAllister is State Coordinator of the NC LINKS Program*



Robert's Story A Case Example

This fictional case example illustrates what can happen when we succeed in helping youth find and sustain positive relationships

Robert was almost 17 when the LINKS worker asked him who had been meaningful in his life. He mentioned foster parents that had taken care of him when he was eight years old, people who told him that they would have adopted him if they could.

The couple moved out of state after Robert was reunified with his family. When he re-entered foster care, he lost touch with them. With the help of the Internet, his social worker located the family and let them know about Robert's situation. They had no idea he was still in foster care, and no idea that he had become available for adoption when he was ten. They asked for a visit. LINKS funds were used to fly him to New York. Correspondence and visits continued, and the family and Robert decided adoption was still a great option. The adoption was finalized the day before his 18th birthday. Robert is enjoying getting to know his new extended family, as well as renewing his friendship with his older adopted brother.



12 Skills Corner . . . Building Self-Esteem

You may recall from your pre-service training, you studied 12 skills that help foster and adoptive parents become successful. In this edition of *Fostering Perspectives*, we want to highlight one of those skills: building your child's self-esteem. It is never too late to build a child confidence and self-esteem. Here are ten ideas for you to try this month.

1. Spend quality time with your children. This sends the message that they are important and worthy. Each child must feel special, loved, and accepted.
2. Help them develop problem solving and decision making skills. This increases their sense of control and is an important part of developing self-motivation.
3. Avoid interrupting them when they are talking. Allowing them to complete their thought will help them feel that what they are saying is worth listening to.
4. Ask for their help. This could be helping around the house or giving back to the community. By allowing them to make a positive difference in the lives of others, we boost their own self-worth and confirm they have something valuable to offer.
5. Look at how you handle your mistakes. The way you deal with your mistakes serves as a model for how your children will respond to theirs. Do you get angry, yell or depressed when you make a mistake? Or do you discuss what you learned or how you might do things differently next time?
6. Praise is a very important motivator and will increase the child's confidence. Never underestimate this simple tool—it can have a lifelong impact.
7. It is never too late to start a Life Book for a child. Life Books are an effective way to build self-esteem and help children cope with their past and current circumstances.
8. Frame your requests in the positive. Rather than saying, "Don't leave the lights on!" say "Can you help us save money on the electric bill by turning off your radio and lights before school?"
9. Help them use good eye contact when interacting with someone. When you model this behavior it shows them they have your full attention.
10. When correcting behavior, do it in private and be sure to focus on the behavior rather than attacking the child's character. This demonstrates and teaches the child respect.

Sources: Brooks, 2001; Parent Wonder, n.d.

Graduate college debt-free with NC Reach by Amanda Elder

In 2007, North Carolina launched a wonderful new program for foster and adopted youth in college. The only program of its kind in the country, NC Reach is testament to our state's commitment to the future of all its citizens. NC Reach provides college funding and support services to young people adopted from North Carolina DSS foster care after the age of 12 or who have aged out of the system at 18. Thanks to NC Reach, these students will be able to graduate debt free from any North Carolina public community college or four-year school!

Betsy Sioussat, whose two adopted children participate in the program, is effusive in her praise: "Although we would have found a way to send our children to college no matter what, it gives me great peace of mind to know that they are part of such a generous and comprehensive program." Her children have to work fewer hours than they anticipated because their tuition and books are covered, and they can take advantage of NC Reach's workshops and mentoring.

Administered by the Orphan Foundation of America (OFA), NC Reach provides a whole system of financial, academic, and personal support. Because program participants include both foster and adopted youth, the level of support can vary. Some students benefit primarily from the financial aspect; parents who adopt teenagers do not have the time to put aside college funding but can encourage their children emotionally and academically. Other young people leave the system virtually alone, and NC Reach

works closely with them to help them develop independence, sound academic and personal choices, and fiscal responsibility.

vMentor

NC Reach's online mentors (vMentors) provide personal, one-on-one, long-term support and guidance. Every student is matched with a mentor based on professional and academic interests as well as according to hobbies, cultural background, and even spiritual attitudes. Says UNC-Wilmington alumna Jessica, who had an online mentor through OFA's own scholarship program, "I wasn't even sure I wanted a mentor, but looking back I know I couldn't have managed without her advice and encouragement. When I met her in person at my graduation, it was like seeing a long-lost friend!"

Care Packages

NC Reach students are automatically enrolled in OFA's Care Package Program, receiving three care packages a year, including a signature hand-made red scarf around Valentine's Day. These packages are a potent reminder that our foster youth are part of a much wider community, which cares about and encourages their hopes and dreams.

Workshops

NC Reach offers workshops on a wide array of useful and interesting subjects, including, "Balancing Work and School," "How to Buy a Car," and "Daycare Choices." NC Reach students must attend one workshop every semester, although they are encouraged to participate in as many as they want.



Foster care alumni attending college. Photos courtesy Orphan Foundation of America.

InternAmerica

NC Reach's InternAmerica Program places summer interns in businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies across North Carolina and in Washington, D.C. Interns receive professional coaching and attend professional development seminars. They are supported with stipends and, if their internship is out-of-state, with transportation and housing.

Academic Success Program

It was written into the legislation creating NC Reach that participants must be "making good academic progress." Therefore, students have to maintain a 2.0 GPA on a 4-point scale. Recognizing that some semesters are more trying than others and that life's circumstances sometimes get in the way of academics, NC Reach believes in giving every student a second chance. The Academic Success Program provides study guides, advice, and weekly encouragement from a personal academic coach, as well as special support from the student's vMentor, to any participant who falls below a 2.0 GPA. *Any student who makes below a 2.0 GPA two semesters in a row is suspended from NC Reach funding for one full year.*

NC Reach is nurturing a new generation of upstanding, contributing members of society. NC Reach works to ensure that students not only attend school, but graduate with degrees that enable them to get good jobs. Innovative and far-reaching, NC Reach may be the harbinger of similar programs in other states.

As Blue Ridge Community College student Joseph said, "NC Reach has opened my eyes to possibilities I never even dreamed of. I now have faith in my own future and know that with support I'll succeed no matter what obstacles I have to overcome."

For further information or to enroll, visit www.ncreach.org or contact Amanda Elder, NC Reach Program Manager, at 1-800-585-6112 or amanda@ncreach.org.

NC Reach: Eligibility, Funding, and Benefits

Eligibility Requirements

- Applicants must have aged out of North Carolina's DSS foster care system at age 18 or have been adopted from the system after the age of 12.
- Applicants must be considered residents of North Carolina for tuition purposes.
- Applicants must attend a North Carolina state university or community college. For a list of eligible schools, visit www.northcarolina.edu.
- Participants must maintain a 2.0 GPA on a four-point scale and be making "satisfactory progress" towards a degree.

Funding Process

NC Reach funding is "last dollar," up to the full cost of attendance at the student's school. The following are applied before NC Reach funds are awarded: Pell Grants, Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funding, federal work study, private grants and scholarships.

Benefits

- **Funding.** Graduate debt-free from a community college or four-year public school.
- **Mentoring.** Be matched with a volunteer online mentor (vMentor) based on professional/academic/personal interests and goals.
- **Workshops.** You must attend at least one workshop every semester. Topics relate to school, work, and home life.
- **Academic Support.** Participants are coached by mentors, NC Reach staff; if they fall below a 2.0 GPA they are enrolled in a program for intensive academic support.
- **Internships.** Participants are eligible for paid, supported summer internships across NC and in Washington DC.
- **Care Packages.** Receive three care packages a year, including the signature Red Scarf Valentine's Day package.
- **Administrative support.** Participants are supported by NC Reach's highly trained administrative staff, who help guide them from incoming freshman to graduating senior.

There are children in foster care awaiting adoption

On April 30, 2008 there were 10,530 children in DSS custody in North Carolina. Of these children, 982 (9%) were legally free for adoption and waiting for a family.

Who Are These Children?

Of the children awaiting adoption at the end of April, nearly half (42%) were teenagers. Of the rest, children from infancy to age 5 made up 24%, while those between the ages of 6 and 12 made up 34%.

The racial composition of this group of waiting children was as follows: 46% White, 42% African-American, 5% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% American Indian (NCDSS, 2008).

Seeing Beyond the Numbers

Of course, children waiting to be adopted aren't numbers. They are individuals with unique faces and hearts, histories and dreams. You can see this in the profiles in the box below, and in the descriptions of waiting children featured on North Carolina's adoption photolisting web site <www.adoptnckids.org>.

Foster Parents and Adoption

Most children adopted from foster care find permanence either with their foster parents or with kin. Certainly this is true in North Carolina. For example, of the children adopted from foster care in our state in fiscal year 2005-06, 54.1% were adopted by their foster parents and 23.3% were adopted by a relative (USDHHS, 2008).

This makes perfect sense: foster families and relatives are the ones who know the children best and have cared for them day in and day

Behind the numbers are children with unique faces and hearts, histories and dreams.

out. The box at right describes some of the traits that researchers have identified in families who successfully adopt children from foster care.

What You Can Do

If you are a foster parent who is not in a position to adopt, you can

still help. Your knowledge, experience, and the commitment you have shown to children can make you a powerful, persuasive adoption advocate. Here are a few simple steps you can take right now:

- Tell your social worker you are looking for ways to help find permanent families for children who need them.
- Learn all you can about adoption—a good advocate is well informed.
- Don't be shy—initiate contact. Ask members of your family and neighborhood if they know anyone interested in adoption. Make people aware of the need for adoptive families.
- List all the different groups with which you are involved. Talk to friends at church, community center or club members, and sorority or fraternity brothers and sisters about adoption. Although these informal conversations may seem simple, they can be the start of something wonderful for a child and family (NACAC, 2001).

By promoting adoption you can make a difference that will last a lifetime!

Successful Adoptions

Many things contribute to successful foster parent adoptions. One of the most important is the adoptive family itself. According to the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (n.d.) resource families that successfully adopt children from foster care:

- Like to give and help
- Are satisfied with their lives
- Are resourceful
- Are tolerant of loss, anxiety, and ambiguity
- Have a sense of humor
- Are involved with the child in the community

Furthermore, researchers who studied foster/adoptive families in the early 1980s found that families who successfully adopted the children in their care had the following characteristics (Meezan & Shireman, 1985b):

- They expected the children would be placed long-term and had the children in their home for a longer period of time than foster parents who did not choose to adopt.
- They enjoyed the children and were able to be actively involved with them.
- The foster parents had some acceptance of the birth family's positive attributes and were able to talk about them with their children. However, these foster families also perceived the children to be similar to themselves in some way.
- The children who were adopted by their foster families had successfully resolved their ties to their birth families and were younger than children not adopted by their foster families.

Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2005

Meet Tyquan and Ty'Darius...

Tyquan and Ty'Darius are typical boys with a typical sibling relationship. They laugh, joke, wrestle, and blame each other when something goes wrong. They love attending church and singing in the choir. Their foster parents are fabulous singers and often lead songs in church. Tyquan and Ty'Darius enjoy pretending they are singing like them.

A Closer Look at Tyquan...

Tyquan is an adorable, easygoing, and playful little boy. He has wonderful manners and is very polite. Tyquan loves to laugh and giggle to show off his big, wide smile created by his missing four front teeth. He gets along well with everyone and has lots of friends. Tyquan recently finished playing on a local tag football team and is extremely proud that he was the only boy who made any touchdowns. He also likes to play outside with Ty'Darius and the neighborhood children. Tyquan enjoys riding his bike or his motorized fire truck, playing on the computer, and watching TV. He attends regular classes at school where he enjoys learning new things and is especially good at math. Tyquan recently received a Handwriting Certificate for Best Handwriting. He is a very good student. Counseling is helping Tyquan address his feelings of grief and loss, as well as developing coping skills. Born: Aug. 1, 2001.

A Closer Look at Ty'Darius...

Ty'Darius is a cute, affectionate, outspoken, and active child. He is a bright little boy who loves to laugh and play with other children and generally gets along well with them. Ty'Darius enjoys going on community outings with his church's youth group and recently had a blast when they all went to the movies. He also likes to

travel to the beach and amusement parks with his brother and foster family. Ty'Darius loves playing with his toys, his cars, and the motorized fire truck. He attends a local daycare center where he struggles with structured activities in which he must sit for extended periods of time. Ty'Darius requires concrete instructions along with clear rules and expectations. He receives speech/language therapy to help improve his articulation and to express himself consistently and appropriately. Counseling is helping Ty'Darius work through his feelings of loss and grief, give him appropriate coping skills, and learn acceptable methods of expressing his frustration. Born: Dec. 19, 2003.

A Family for Tyquan and Ty'Darius...

Tyquan and Ty'Darius have done very well with a family that provides them with simple concrete instructions, clear rules and expectations, consistency, structure, and lot of love and attention. An adoptive family must be able to continue this type of environment for these boys to continue to be successful. (NC #092-3000) (NC #092-3001)



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

Writing Contest

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

Imagine that you are about to go to a new foster care placement. What are the things you'd like to know ahead of time about the home and the family you'll be placed with?

Deadline: February 5, 2009

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

We're Also Seeking Artwork and Other Writing Submissions
Submissions can be on any theme. The submission requirements described above apply.



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

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 919/334-1172.

In-Service Quiz, FP v13#1

1. Name two things you personally can do to help teens in foster care who are in need of a foster family.
2. Why are children sometimes reluctant to reveal that they have been sexually abused?
3. What are the three stages of birth parent grief Donna Foster talks about in her article?
4. Name two things that foster parents can do at each of these three stages to engage, motivate, and support birth parents.
5. What did Lynne Miller's child's foster mother do to help her get her son back?
6. What advice do the young people who participated in this issue's writing contest have for foster parents who are reluctant to care for teens?
7. Name four things the youth advocacy group SaySo will do in 2009.
8. Who is eligible to participate in the NC Reach Program? What are the benefits of this innovative program?
9. Name four things foster parents who do not currently have children placed in their homes can do to make a difference in the lives of children.
10. Why is it important for young adults who are "graduating" from foster care to have a personal support system of at least five caring adults in addition to professional relationships?

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How Do You Know You Are a Foster Parent?

- You open your home and heart 24 hours a day to children you haven't even met.
- You know your family will grieve as children enter and leave your home, but having the children in your lives is worth it.
- Though you realize you can't heal the child's pain, you strive to be a part of the healing.
- You volunteer all of your love even when sometimes children and their families can't accept it.
- You see the strengths in children when others see their weaknesses.
- You know others may not understand your choice to foster and may even avoid your family. Lost friendships are missed, but to you fostering is worth it.
- Your inner faith is enhanced as you see children grow and flourish. Even the slightest smile of a child is a victory. Their small steps are major successes.
- You understand and aid a child returning home to a healthier family. You do what you can, even if you may not agree with the decision. You understand most of us want to be with our own families.
- Material wealth isn't important to you. You choose to live with less to be able to give more.
- You are humble to the praises of others for what you are doing because you feel this is what we all should be doing. It is your normal way of life.
- You learn from your mistakes and strive to do the best you can.
- You record your children's lives through Life Books, journals, and files because you know for confused children, you are the one to help them make sense of their lives. They can count on you. You are the "memory keeper."
- Your arms never closed to a child and your heart holds them forever.



by Donna Foster and Joanne Scaturro

fostering perspectives

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