

fostering perspectives

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Parent-child visits: Managing the challenges, reaping the rewards

After she entered foster care, Donisha learned she would have regular visits with her family. She says that to her:

That word 'visitation' was like a rainbow suddenly appearing out of a dull sky . . . just knowing I could be reunited with my family made me overjoyed.

Learning to manage the challenges of visits brings rewards to children, birth parents, agencies, and foster parents.

Donisha's reaction is easy to understand. It can be wonderful to spend time with someone you love after a separation.

Yet visits can also be extremely difficult for everyone involved. If you are a foster and kinship care provider, you know this well. When a visit occurs, it is sometimes accompanied by visit-related upheaval in the child's emotions and behavior, complex scheduling and logistics, and other challenges.

Luckily, there are things you can do to make parent-child visits easier for yourself and the children in your care. First, however, it will help to understand why visits are so important.

Understanding the Rewards

Yes, they sometimes make us sweat with uncertainty and cause us temporary discomfort, but research and experience clearly show that parent-child visits can make a positive difference in children's lives. Regular visits can:

- Maintain parent-child attachment
- Calm children's separation fears
- Empower birth parents
- Encourage birth parents to face reality
- Allow birth parents to learn and practice new skills and behaviors
- Help child welfare agencies and the courts assess and document parents' progress
- Help children and foster parents see the parents realistically

(Hess et al., 1992; Cantos & Gries, 1997)

Research also tells us that how frequently parents and children see each other makes a big difference. Children who are visited often by their birth parents are more likely to be reunited and spend less time in foster care (White, et al., 1996; Mech, 1985).

Frequent visits also affect children's well-being. Children visited frequently by their parents may be:

- Less likely to have emotional outbursts, tension, and conflict
- Less likely to be referred for psychiatric services
- Less likely to engage in delinquent or antisocial acts such as vandalism, stealing, and running away
- More likely to be seen as likeable by teachers and peers

(White et al., 1996; Cantos & Gries, 1997)

One study showed that children visited at least once every two weeks had fewer behavioral problems and exhibited less anxiety and depression than children visited infrequently or not at all (White, et al., 1996).

By helping improve children's behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social functioning, visits can help make foster care placements happier and more stable, which is a good thing for children and foster parents.

Managing Children's Behavior Changes

Foster and kinship care providers need to know how to manage the challenges that surround visits. To provide you with concrete suggestions in this area, on the next page we offer ideas excerpted from "Changes in Children's Behavior Before and After Parent Visits," from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development. Although targeted to foster parents of children age five and under, many of these suggestions are relevant to all children in foster care.



10 Ways Social Workers Can Support Foster Parents Around Visitation

1. Keep foster parents abreast of any changes; have an ongoing discussion about visiting
2. Facilitate pre-placement visits between the child and foster family whenever possible
3. Tell foster families what kinds of behaviors they can expect to see on the part of birth parents and children before, during, and after a visit
4. Involve foster parents in meetings with the biological family and providers (shared parenting)
5. Ensure foster families receive ongoing education, particularly about the reasons for and effects of visitation
6. Facilitate peer support by connecting foster families to each other, particularly through local and state foster parent associations
7. Discuss with foster families how they will handle any visit-related problems, and make sure they know you are open and available to discuss any issues or concerns they have
8. Avoid overcomplicating visitation for foster families by placing too many children from different families or too many children with special needs in one home
9. Involve foster families in the planning of the visit schedule; always keep the family's schedule and needs in mind when planning visit times and locations
10. Encourage and appreciate foster parents for their efforts to support visitation and to work with birth parents

Understanding the child's response to birth parent visits

From "Changes in Children's Behavior Before and After Parent Visits," from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development

There are no foolproof ways to guarantee that visits between children and their birth parents will be successful. But knowing about behaviors you might see and taking a few steps to prepare a child and facilitate the visit should help.

Before-visit symptoms. Children can be affected by knowing that a visit with their birth parents is approaching. Here are some of the symptoms you might see in your child before the visit:

- Nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- Unrealistic expectations about how the visit will go.
- Anxiety.

After-visit symptoms. Children can experience a variety of feelings after visiting with their birth parents. They also might behave in ways that are difficult to cope with. Feelings and behaviors you might see from your child after a visit include:

- Nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- Crying, sometimes excessively.
- Sadness.
- Disappointment.
- Acting out, such as stomping feet, displaying antisocial behavior, and ignoring family members.
- Anger.
- Ambivalence.
- Withdrawal.
- Anxiety.

Preparing for the visit. It is important to do what you can to prepare the children for a visit with birth parents. Here are some suggestions:

- Make the necessary changes in your family's schedule to accommodate the visit.
- Work with the birth parents to plan and schedule visits.
- Keep the child informed of planned visits.
- Have some special before-visit rituals to comfort the child, such as arranging special clothes or fixing the child's hair in a particular way.
- Be realistic with the child about which family members will and will not be at the visits—for example, mom only, mom and dad, grandparents, etc.
- Be open about which non-family members will be at the visit. These might include a social worker, other caseworkers, yourself, etc.
- Provide extra emotional support to your child before the visit.

Continued contact between the child and the birth family has a big influence on whether the child remains in foster care or is reunified.

• Make a game out of before-visit time. You might, for example, let the children "play the social worker" by having them ask questions and play the role.

• Find out what the child would like to do at the visit and try to arrange the

activity. If his or her idea is not realistic, work with him or her to come up with a more practical plan.

- Talk about any items—toys, books, etc.—they would like to take to the visit.

Facilitating visits. You always should try your best to make visits between children and their birth parents go smoothly. Here are a few steps you can take that might help:

- Try to have the visit take place in your home or in the birth parents' home rather than in an agency office.
- Volunteer to provide transportation to and from visits.
- Help birth parents by being a model of appropriate parenting behavior.
- Reinforce the birth parents' confidence in their parenting skills when they show positive change.
- Respect the birth parents and treat them fairly.
- When appropriate or necessary, observe visits.
- Be careful when talking about the birth parents. Try to be positive.

After-visit support. There may be some circumstances that occur that need attention after the visit. Here are some suggestions for handling the period after the visit.

- Talk to the child and about how the visit went.
- Let the child talk about how he or she feels about the visit and parents.
- Encourage questions about the visit or the foster situation. Answer them as honestly as possible.
- Reassure the children about any issues they might be concerned about.
- Ask your child what kinds of activities he or she would like to do at the next visit.
- Explain that you understand it can be difficult to visit parents for a little while and then have to leave them again.
- If possible, let the child know when the next visit is scheduled.
- Spend additional time nurturing the child



and showing extra affection. Do this regardless of how the visit went, but especially when a visit does not go well.

- If the child is consistently unhappy or distressed after visits, report this to the social worker.
- Report any suspicion of child abuse immediately.

When a visit is canceled. A canceled visit can be hard on a child. Here are ways to support the child when that happens:

- Provide additional comforting when visits are canceled, for whatever reason.
- When telling the child about a canceled visit, do not blame. Simply explain that the parent made certain choices, the social worker had to reschedule, etc.
- Assure the child that he or she is not the reason the visit was canceled, he or she did not do anything wrong, and he or she is still loved.
- Try to do the activity with the child that was planned with the parents, if possible.
- Spend extra time with the child.

When to seek professional help. Changes in a child's behavior after a visit do not necessarily mean the visit hurt the child. The change might, for example, mean the child has a secure attachment with the parent and that he or she is upset about having to leave the parent again. However, if the behavior changes are severe or overly disruptive to the foster family, professional help may be necessary, and the situation should be brought to the attention of the child's social worker.

A publication of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development made possible with help from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education. Additional topics in the You and Your Foster Child series are available at www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/publications/fosterparent. Other helpful publications on parenting, children, youth, and families from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development are also available online at www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family.

Parent-child visits and shared parenting

Shared parenting is a practice in which foster parents cultivate positive, supportive relationships with birth parents. Shared parenting relationships are based on trust, while keeping the safety and best interests of the child in focus.

Parent-child visiting and shared parenting are a natural fit. As Kate, a mother whose child spent time in foster care, explains in the box at right, contact between foster and birth parents—including contact during visitation—can sometimes blossom into relationships that help parents make the changes needed to reunify their families.

Shared Parenting: A Gradual Process

Shared parenting doesn't happen all at once. Like most relationships, it usually develops gradually. After the initial meeting during the first week the child enters foster care, shared parenting often starts with low-level contact between the birth and foster parents—for example, through the exchange of a weekly journal documenting the child's week and asking questions that only the birth parent can answer.

As everyone grows more comfortable, the relationship between birth and foster parents might progress, involving steps such as:

- Recording the family reading a book and playing it for the child at bedtime
- Going shopping with the birth parent for shoes for the child
- Having dinner at the foster parent's home.

Visit-Related Shared Parenting

Here are suggestions for engaging in shared parenting in and around parent-child visits:

- Discuss the family's expectations about contacts and visits within the foster home, birth home, and community. Are visits doable with everyone's schedule? Can the child call the family whenever he wants or just at certain times of the day?
- Welcome the child's family into your home, and set boundaries with both the parents and child about any areas that are off limits (usually bedrooms). Or go with the child and the family if the child wants to give a tour of the whole house.
- Encourage regular contact between parents and children, as approved by the placing agency. Help make parents feel comfortable visiting in the foster home, or work with the family to find a neutral spot where everyone feels comfortable (school, a mall, library, restaurant, etc.).
- Reassure the parents your job as a foster parent is to keep the child safe and provide temporary care. Remind them you are not a replacement for the child's parents.

Working Together to Help Darren Return Home

Excerpted from *A Family's Guide to the Child Welfare System* by McCarthy et al. (2005)

I visited Darren a lot while he was in foster care and worked hard to get him back. Even though I had two relapses, I went to school full-time and worked part-time. I lived in a shelter some of the time, and I got TANF. Although I wasn't told where Darren's foster home was, I knew because some of the forms that I got from the doctor after Darren's appointments had the foster home address on them. I did not go to the foster home, but it was comforting for me to know where he lived...

After our visits, I always took Darren back to the agency where his foster mother would pick him up. For about a year, I never saw her. One day the agency worker had to leave before the foster mother arrived, so she asked if I would stay with Darren until his foster

mother came. When we met, we were both very stiff, sizing each other up, and didn't think we would like each other. But we were cordial. Shortly after this, Darren's foster mother, Sally, called to tell me that Darren was going to be in a pageant at her church, and she invited me to come. Sally began to invite me to go on other outings with her and Darren. Gradually, we got used to each other, liked each other, and started working together to help Darren return home.

Getting to know Sally is what "did it". . . . Sally helped Darren and me gradually become a family again.

Shared parenting emphasizes foster parents as support, not substitutes.

Kate, Darren's Mom, and Sally, His Foster Mom, Reflect on their Success

Kate: Darren is the one who has benefited the most from the way that Sally and I work together. Sally never tried to replace me in Darren's life. She told him that he couldn't be with me because I was sick and was trying to get better. She let me become very involved in Darren's life while he lived in her home, and she came to every court hearing with me. She didn't let him call her mom, it was Mom Sally or just Sally. Now that he is living with me, he calls her Aunt Sally.

Darren has been home for 5 years. He is now 10 years old, and Sally is still a part of our lives. Darren has ADHD and goes for a lot of treatment and doctor's appointments. . . .

Sally: Kate allows me to co-parent Darren, even after he returned to her home. We have the benefits of co-parenting without having to go through a marriage and a divorce. Darren goes with me on my summer vacation. . . .

Kate: When Darren lived with Sally, we tried to have the same rules for him so he wouldn't be confused. When he came to visit me, I tried to

keep the same routine and rules that Sally had established. The three of us went to counseling together. This helped ease the transition for Darren. Now that Darren is older, we are more flexible...

Sally: This story is about Darren, not about us. As Kate said, Darren is the one who has benefited the most from our working together. He has not had to leave behind any of the people that he has grown up with. He has a larger extended family than he would have had. He was a troubled little boy when he came into foster care at two and a half years old. He had hearing and speech problems, night terrors, and couldn't be contained for a very long period of time. But he was always loving and smiling. . . .

Kate: I always knew that Sally had Darren's best interests in her heart and that she was working with me and not against me. I knew what I had to do to get Darren back home. Sally didn't make me do any of these things, but she supported all of my efforts.

From a Family's guide to the child welfare system. Accessed August 30, 2010 from <http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/products/AFamiliesGuide_English.pdf>

- Send the child to visits with art work, school work, or even homework they can work on with their parents.
- Send the child to visits dressed in clothing that the birth parents have provided for them.
- Write down important information such as milestones, illnesses, new food choices, and updates in a journal and send it with the child to visits.
- Try to arrange the child's schedule so that the birth parent can feed the baby a bottle or give their child a snack during the visit.

(Sources for these suggestions: Foster, 2009; Buncombe Co. DSS, 2009)

What Shared Parenting Accomplishes

- Child's relationship with the birth parent is maintained
- Foster parents form a realistic picture of birth parent's strengths and needs
- Both birth and foster parents have more information about the child
- Foster parents model appropriate behavior and parenting techniques
- Birth parents develop an understanding of the child's needs
- Smoother transitions back into the birth parent's home
- Ongoing support for the family after the child returns home

My experience with visits by Donisha, age 16, SaySo Board Member

One youth's perspective on parent-child visitation

Rules, regulations, and disrespect were the way I viewed DSS, but when it came to visits I took an entirely different view. At first all I did was hate DSS, because they took me away from my mom and my sister. However, I started to have a change of heart when I first heard the word "visitation."

To me that word "visitation" was like a rainbow suddenly appearing out of a dull sky; happiness began to fill me up. My family was the most important thing in my life, it was all that I had, all that I loved, and all that I could depend on. They were my one source of happiness and just knowing I could be reunited with my family made me overjoyed.

That is how I felt about visits, until I actually got to the visiting room and found out visitation was nothing to get excited over.

The First Visit

By the time the first visitation took place, I had not seen my family in an entire month. To me this felt like torture, even though I and one of my younger sisters had been placed together. I wanted all my family together.

When I arrived, I saw my mom waiting for us. I immediately ran up and hugged her. I did the same when my younger sister pulled up along with the social worker, who instructed us to follow her into a room. It was a small room with toys and books, two couches, a table, and three chairs.

The social worker said, "This is where all your visits will be held, and they will be two hours long."

I was immediately enraged and said, "What?! Two hours? That is not enough!" But she simply said, "I'm sorry, it's DSS policy."

After that, I made sure my two hours would be used up to its entirety, not a minute wasted.

Visits Get Shorter

After the first few months the 2-hour visits ended—I found out they would only be one hour a month! It was such an injustice, I wanted to say every curse word in the book.

After that, I only saw my family once a month for one hour. Visits always took place in a small room at DSS, supervised by a social worker, with no privacy at all. To me this did not seem right, but it was policy.

I was so angry that I fussed at the social worker and called the supervisor. To me it seemed DSS had a plan and it did not involve our feelings at all, and especially not during visitations.

An Improvement

At the end of that year, towards the holidays, DSS started to lighten up. DSS had become what I like to call "THOUGHTFUL." My social worker arranged for us to spend first Thanksgiving and then Christmas Eve and Christmas together with my mom and sister.

All of this kindness just made me feel exuberant; I guess this was their way of making up for all the time they stole from us.

After the Holidays

After the holidays, however, visitations went right back to the same old thing that they always been, with one exception.



While my mom was getting herself together, she had gotten a new house, and it was completely furnished and everything. My social worker surprised me and took me to my mom's house for the visit instead of holding it at DSS. So we spent our visit there, almost unsupervised.

Also, since it was not at DSS, it allowed me to see my cousin, who I had not seen in almost a year because DSS restricted visits to immediate family only. (This absolutely tore me up.)

An End of Visits

Although DSS was being nice, it all ended with the passing away of my mom. Yes, I know my mom is in a better place, but why did the visits with my younger sister have to end? DSS always tries to do something nice but later ends up ruining it.

Out of all my life being a foster child, dealing with the DSS system, and all of their rules and policies, visitations were the only thing I looked forward to. No matter how short or where they were held, visitations were the highlight of my day.

Sure, DSS controlled the visits, but they could never control the emotional feeling I had at the end of each visit. Yes, my visits at DSS were not long enough, or ever seemed family oriented, but a visit is a visit, and it was all we got.

I completely appreciated the visits, but I will never love the policies and rules.

Visitation Plans in North Carolina

In North Carolina, birth families have a right to visit their children unless a judge orders otherwise. To ensure that visits occur, North Carolina's child welfare manual directs county departments of social services to develop a **visitation and contact plan** with each parent. These plans are required unless a court orders termination of visitation or termination of parental rights.

Visitation and contact plans in North Carolina are developed by the child's worker with the involvement of the parents, other family members, the child (if appropriate), foster parents, and relevant others, such as a child's therapist. The manual suggests that in addition to the frequency of visits, the visitation and contact plan should address the following crucial elements:

- Where visits will be held
- How long visits will be
- Transportation arrangements for the parents and the child
- Individuals, other than the parents, with whom the child may visit
- Whether visits will be supervised, by whom, and for what purpose
- Anticipated changes in the visiting arrangements as the case progresses
- A clause requiring advance request for visits other than those regularly scheduled
- Explanation of possible consequences if parties do not carry out their responsibilities
- Whether other kinds of contacts are appropriate (e.g., telephone calls, e-mails, letters) and whether monitoring of these forms of contact is needed.

Agencies use the DSS form 5242 (shown here) to develop the visitation and contact plan. In general, it is a good idea for foster parents to know what is in the visitation plan; some agencies ask foster parents to sign this form and share a copy with them. To read about parent-child visitation in the manual, go to http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-10/man/CSs1201c5-10.htm#P337_53194.

VISITATION and CONTACT PLAN	
<small>For each child, state type, time, level of supervision, frequency, duration, location of visits, and transportation arrangements. Revise as often as necessary. If children are separated, also include a plan for sibling visitation. Different forms should be completed when the children have different visitation plans.</small>	
Child(ren) Name(s):	
This plan with _____ is effective _____ through _____	
Supervision Required: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	By Whom: _____
Place of visit:	
Frequency of visits:	
Hours:	
Length of visits:	
Transportation Arrangements:	
Special Considerations:	
Phone Calls Allowed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Monitoring Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
With Whom: _____	Monitoring Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Mail/Email Allowed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Monitoring Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
From Whom: _____	Monitoring Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Send All Mail/Email to:	

Foster parents reflect on parent-child visits

Fostering Perspectives asked the board members of the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association—all of whom are foster parents—about their experiences with parent-child visits and lessons learned. Though every child and family situation is different, their responses may confirm some of your own thoughts and perhaps give you added insight and ideas to help make visits a positive experience for children, birth parents, and others.

What does it feel like when a visit goes well?

- It is an awesome feeling when you know that you are assisting a family in continuing to be a family. One birth mom asked to hide in the trunk and come home with us. She wanted to spend every available moment with her child. Another time we facilitated a Christmas get-together with the children and their extended family at our church. . . . Even though we were not sure that the family was appreciative, we knew that the kids really loved seeing them.
- We're gratified that the process works.
- Visits are valuable to the treatment of foster children to let them know they have a complete team who wants to make their life better.

What does it feel like when a visit doesn't go well?

- [We were] upset with the birth parents for returning the child upset.
- "Frustration" sums it up. Feeling that we went the extra mile and took the time and effort and birth parents could not do the same. I felt extremely awful when any of "my" children would scream in the presence of the birth parent. I've also had families act as though I wasn't even in the room. Even when the child is doing really well in our home, sometimes a visit can certainly disrupt that for days after.
- It is so hard on foster parents because we want things to go well for the child. It's important to tell the child the truth, speaking to them with age-appropriate words so they will understand. Let them know you will be there to try and help them understand what is going on.

How do you and others behave during visits?

- We have always encouraged visits, since reunification is the goal.
- We all keep it as normal a conversation as possible. Our team has been pretty stable and we are comfortable talking to each other.
- When it goes really well we act as friends. This is what building a relationship looks like. Children do best in this situation. When it goes fairly well we act as acquaintances and don't really get as much accomplished as we'd like. But at least the children know that we can all be in the same room and respect each other. When it doesn't go well at all, NO information gets exchanged. There is tension all around and the kids can feel it. I have had parents tell the social worker they won't do another visit if I am there. Nothing good comes of it; it is extremely difficult to have a one-sided relationship.

What is the connection to shared parenting?

- Visits are good for all involved to see whether the (birth) family has been able to care for their child and learn parenting skills. If foster parents are doing shared parenting they can help birth parents with these skills. Often in the beginning the family may not understand what shared parenting is, but with time and patience the birth parents will understand you are trying to help them have their child back in their home, not yours. It also shows when that is not going to work, too, and often helps families understand that reality.
- Sharing skills between foster parents and birth parents can help make birth parents stronger, more knowledgeable, and also help the foster parents [in caring for] the children.
- You cannot have true shared parenting without some mutual respect.
- The birth mom is invited to team meetings and encouraged to participate in activities with the child. We work together whenever possible.

What advice do you have for foster parents and social workers?

- All agencies need to understand how stressful visits are and have extra education for foster parents on them. Agencies need to have an agreement with foster parents that the truth will always be told. Foster parents should have the same [agreement] with the child. If a foster parent is upset over a visit they need to document it and give that to the agency.
- It's good to plan ahead to have things to share with the family. If the child is old enough, let them share, too. It makes visits go much better. Share things such as school work, information on what the child has been doing, and pictures for the family to keep. Talk with the agency before the visit to make sure [sharing] these things is OK.
- COMMUNICATE!! Not giving the foster parents

One of the most important things a foster parent can remember about visits is that they are for the child and their family, not the foster parent. Also, remember that how you act can and will have an influence on the child and maybe their family.

— NC Foster Parent

the information that is pertinent to caring for the child is inexcusable. The foster parents should ASK questions!

- Share, be open, be real, and be honest.
- I have been a foster parent for almost nine years and each child, county, social worker, agency, GAL, etc. is different. There is no cookie cutter answer for working with the system, you just need to be the best advocate for the child you can be.

Additional comments:

- Team meetings only work when everyone is valued as a real resource and treated equally with respect.
- We are mindful that everyone will remember the visits good, bad, or indifferent. We prepare by remembering that we are foster parents, no matter which direction the case is going. Then we let the child know this is a visit and that they are not moving back or to any other place. We want them to enjoy the visit and have fun. If the child is old enough we make sure a camera is there for them to use. We also hope the family has also been prepared.
- One of the most important things a foster parent can remember about visits is that they are for the child and their family, not for the foster parent. Also how you act can and will have an influence on the child and maybe their family.

Thanks to Karen LeClair and the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association for contributing to this article.

A Tool for Enhancing Visits: The "Happy Pack"

To help make parent-child visits more meaningful, foster parents can provide a backpack or bag the child can use to share with their parents those special things that have happened since the last visit. Between visits the child can be encouraged to put things into the "Happy Pack" that he or she is excited to share with their parents. Examples of what might be in a pack:

- A favorite book
- A note that captures something cute or funny the child has said
- New words the child is saying, if it's a younger child
- A picture the child drew or colored
- A note from the child's teacher or an assignment the child is proud of
- A snapshot of the child doing a favorite activity
- A letter the child has written to his or her parents

Whenever something comes up that children may want to share with their parents, encourage them to put it into their Happy Pack. This gives parents a place to start their visits—it lets them know what their child has been doing since the last visit. It also allows parents to feel more involved in their child's life. And the child will be very proud and excited to share their Happy Pack!

(Adapted from the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Assoc., n.d.)





Celebrating holidays with children you foster

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Conflicting loyalties and lost dreams often make the holidays a difficult time for children in foster care. Just as studies show that holidays are stressful times for most of us, these reactions are compounded for youth placed in your home. Here are some suggestions for managing the holidays.

How can my family make it easier for the children in foster care while they are in our home?

- Talk about the season ahead of time. Talk about how your family celebrates the holidays. Tell children which of the traditional holidays your house recognizes. Is it Thanksgiving? St. Nick's Day? Kwanzaa? Hanukah? Christmas? New Year? Or all of the above? Talking about the holidays gives children time to anticipate the upcoming activities and ask questions.
- Help children in foster care imagine what to expect in your home. Much of what we assume to be commonplace can be new to the children you foster.
- Share the religious meanings the holidays may have for your family. Talk about your family's specific customs and activities.
- Use this time of sharing to learn especially about the religious beliefs, customs, and activities of the children you foster.
- Try to incorporate at least some of their traditions into your traditions.
- Some parents try to keep the holidays low key in order to help minimize some of the stress.

How can we work with birth families during the holidays?

- Again, ask children about their experiences and try to incorporate some of their traditions. The children placed in your home may miss some activities that they experienced with their family or in a previous placement.
- If possible, ask your child's family members about their holiday traditions and customs. Ask about their beliefs and observances. Although you may feel stretched at the holidays, try to coordinate schedules with the birth families. This gives the children a chance to share what is familiar while experiencing new traditions.
- This is a good time for the youth in your home to make small gifts and send cards to their birth families or old neighbors and friends.
- This is a time when many children feel conflicted feelings about their birth families and worry about them. It is a good time to let the young person know that it is okay for them to be safe and cared for even if their family struggles. Reassure them if you can, about the safety and care of their birth family.

What are some of the ways I can help the children who I foster get through the holidays? What are some signs of grief or sadness that I can look for?

- Be prepared for the sadness and grief. Talk about your child's feelings throughout the season.
- Give your children time and space to grieve. Grief takes many forms and may be exhibited in lots of ways, including:
 - Reverting back to younger behaviors developmentally
 - Soiling themselves or bedwetting
 - Becoming withdrawn and isolated
 - Having temper tantrums
 - Being rebellious
 - Complaining more than usual
- Try to remember the developmental age of the children you foster. It will also help you to stay patient if you keep in mind the challenges of the season for your child before you react.



Religious Differences & the Holidays

The holidays can be tough for foster families. Children in care miss their families and their traditions, while at the same time they may want to be part of the activities of the foster family. When there's a religious difference between the child's family and the foster family, things can become even more complicated.

Religion can be a sensitive issue. Legally, birth parents have the right to choose their children's religion or lack of religion. Placement of their child in foster care does not take away this right.

Of course, most foster parents try to respect the culture and religious customs of the children in their care. But what does this mean when it comes to religion?

The answer lies in establishing open lines of communication among foster parents, DSS, and the birth family. If your agency knows how you feel about religious issues (for example, if prayer makes you feel uncomfortable, or if you feel compelled to convert children and their families), it will make informed placement decisions. If you haven't already done so, consider talking with your social worker about how religion affects your role as a foster parent.

This communication works both ways. The more you know about the religion, traditions, and preferences of birth families, the easier it will be for you to act in a way that honors their beliefs.

What are some things we can do to make family get-togethers easier?

- Talk about upcoming events and the people who will be there. If you cannot get together before the big event, introduce your children to family and friends who will be at the celebration by going through pictures.
- Prepare them for the "characters" in your family and also tell them about other children who might be there.
- Tell them if your celebrations are quiet or loud, sacred or silly, big or small.
- Describe the home or place where the event will be held, and tell how it usually proceeds.
- Be realistic about it—do not make your celebrations seem perfect, but do not stress the challenges that are part of all family events.
- Give your children a camera so that they can record the celebration, and also give them one for holiday visits with their birth families.

What can I do to help my children learn what is expected of them at family celebrations?

- This is an opportunity to teach the behaviors and manners that you would like the youth you foster to learn. Go over basic manners such as "please" and "thank you."
- Explain the expectations of children prior to family get-togethers, and practice those behaviors ahead of time.
- Use role playing at home so that they can practice.
- Make sure you and your family/friends are on the same page regarding gifts from and to your children. Perhaps try to have your child bring a small hostess gift to the get together: baked goods, nuts, candles, ornament, etc.
- Tell family and friends about your children, and try to introduce them before the holidays. It's a good time to remind others about the confidentiality you honor concerning the children you foster, and it might be a good time to practice some polite but firm answers to some questions.
- Remember especially to ask your children what they would like to have shared about themselves.

Kids' Page

Words and Pictures by and for Children in Foster Care

Vol. 15, No. 1 • November 2010

"The greatest gift I ever gave"

In the last issue we asked young people in foster care what the best gift they ever gave was, and what made it such a good gift. Here's what they had to say.

—John McMahon, Editor



The Greatest Gift I've Given

The best gift I ever gave someone was love, because it's unconditional and unspeakable and people are really happy when you give and show them love. They respect you more, because loves shows respect, peacefulness, and happiness.

—Talik, age 12

I gave my dad a drawing . . . he likes to put it on his wall so he can look at it and be proud of me. . . . It was a good gift because I put effort into drawing it. —Zachary, age 9

When I gave Kate my friendship, she gave me hers in return. It was the best gift because we need each other. . . . We have SO much fun together! —Jayna, age 12

On Mother's Day I gave my step-mom (who is really my foster mom), Mrs. Inez, three beautiful pairs of earrings and a gorgeous silver bracelet. . . . As she opened the box, I noticed this huge smile on her face and a bright sparkle in her eyes. They looked like diamonds in the moonlit sky. I could clearly see and tell that she really loved the gifts. She gave me a huge hug, thanked me, and said she would always treasure this gift. . . . I am so thankful to have Mrs. Inez and her family in my life. —Heather, age 14

When I was still with my mother. . . . I failed the 1st grade because I couldn't read.

So in my second year of first grade I was really not that good, in the beginning. At school we had an award ceremony. . . . I was as nervous as can be, but I should not have worried, because I got best improved!

. . . . I looked at my mom, who was in the back. She was crying and holding my grandma's hand. She was so happy because it meant she was a good mom and was doing something right. I didn't understand it then, but the best gift you can give somebody is love and happiness. This all happened about 4 weeks before my mom died of diabetes.

. . . . The one thing that keeps me going is the fact that at one time somebody loved me very much and I gave them the best present life can give. —Katie

The best gift I've given someone would have to be me....[because] God gave me a package of great abilities, such as making people smile, helping other people, and being a good friend to someone. —Anthony, age 15

The young people above received \$15 for having their letters published

Felicia, age 15

1

The best gift that I ever gave anyone would have to be to my new mom. I gave her my heart in love and all she really wanted from me was good behavior.

I showed her good behavior by being kind and respectful and by following the rules. I am not perfect—sometimes I make mistakes—but from my heart, I really want to do what is right.

I am thankful for Ms. Anitta, my foster mom, for helping me through giving me a warm, loving, nurturing home. I appreciate her guidance and encouraging me to go for my dreams. It really makes a difference in one's life when you know that someone is rooting for you. I would also like to give a big shout out to the other two ladies in my life, Ms. Maria and Ms. Priscilla, who are other foster moms in my life.

I am blessed: I have at least three people who care about me. It feels so good to love and to be loved.

Felicia received \$100 for winning first prize.

The best gift I ever gave was to my new mom: I gave her my heart in love.

Bianca, age 16

2

I had a little foster sister and I taught her how to ride her bike. This was the best gift because this is something that she will know how to do for a lifetime. When she is older she will teach her kids how to do this, and so on. It makes me feel good that I taught someone a lifetime skill and it makes me feel good when I see her riding her bike up and down the road cause I can say "I did that, I taught her how to ride a bike." Maybe, just maybe, when she's older and teaching her kids or anyone else to ride a bike she will remember that I taught her!

Bianca received \$50 for winning second prize.

My best gift was teaching someone something they will know how to do for a lifetime.

Donisha, age 16

3

The best gift I ever gave someone was friendship. Bradford was a tall, light-skinned fellow with big ears, a big nose, braces, and a monkey face. . . . In my eyes he was the perfect dork . . . I was so popular I felt untouchable—I thought I was all that and a bag of chips. Then one day my pre-algebra teacher made us do partner work. . . . From that very moment we became the greatest of friends.

We came from two different worlds. His parents were middle class and he had very fine belongings. I grew up with little I could call my own. He was subtle, timid, and kind of quiet; he only spoke when spoken to, but smiled a lot. I was just the opposite—loud, outgoing, and hardly ever shy. But once I started talking to Brad, I found out what a sweet and funny guy he was. . . .

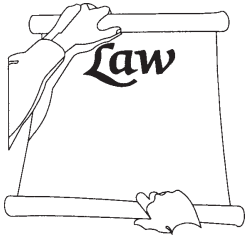
Brad and I became inseparable. We would always pick each other for partner work, sit by each other, and walk with each other. Brad even sat at the girls' table at lunch just so he could talk to me. We were truly best friends. . . .

Because of getting to know Brad, I will never assume anything about another person. . . . Because of me, I believe Brad became a better, less timid person. I know he sure changed me. . . . Friendship is the greatest gift you can ever give someone—it leaves one with such great memories and fun times.

Donisha received \$25 for winning third prize.

Friendship is the greatest gift you can ever give—it leaves such great memories.

Fostering Connections: A law foster parents should know about



The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 became federal law on October 7, 2008. Many experts consider it to be the most significant child welfare reform in over a decade. In state legislatures across the country, over 97 bills have passed or are pending as states work to comply with the law's many provisions (FCNRC, n.d).

Fostering Connections will lead to changes in the way that state, local, and tribal child welfare agencies work towards health and education outcomes, family reunification, adoption, and independent living skills for children and youth in care.

The table below lists the six major policy areas of the law, some of the major provisions of each one, and North Carolina's response to date. For additional information on Fostering Connections, visit the Fostering Connections Resource Center website at www.fosteringconnections.org.

Fostering Connections Provision	North Carolina's Response
1. Support for kinship care and family connections	
1a. States have the option to provide guardianship assistance (financial assistance to relatives caring for children in foster care)	The NC Division of Social Services is currently pursuing this option. A workgroup, in conjunction with NC Association of County Directors of Social Services, is being formulated.
1b. States are required to notify maternal and paternal relatives when a child is placed in foster care	This provision has been fully implemented. North Carolina developed a variety of sample forms and new policies for relative notification effective August 2009. The Division is also providing support to counties to expand their capacity to search for relatives.
1c. States are required to make reasonable efforts to keep siblings together	This is already part of policy and practice in North Carolina.
1d. States have increased flexibility to license relatives as foster care providers eligible for foster care board payments (non-licensed relative caregivers do not receive board payments)	North Carolina already has such flexibility as part of its licensing rules.
1e. Grants available to support family connections for children in care	North Carolina applied for two federal grants under this funding stream but did not receive them. The Division plans to apply again if future opportunities become available.
2. Support for older youth	
2a. States have the option to continue providing foster care, adoption, or guardianship payments to children after age 18	NC provides the option of extending foster care payments for youth over age 18 who opt to sign a Contractual Agreement for Residential Services. NC has pursued the option of extending adoption and guardianship payments; however, due to the economy, it is unlikely to be implemented in the foreseeable future.
2b. States are required to have personal transition plans for youth within 90 days of their aging out of foster care	This provision has been fully implemented. NC developed a new form, the Emancipation Plan (DSS-5315), and related policy effective August 2009. In addition, new requirements for this Emancipation Plan are being implemented to enhance the preparation of youths for their transition out of care.
2c. Extended eligibility for Independent Living services to children adopted or placed in kinship guardianship at age 16 or older	Youth are eligible for LINKS, NC's voluntary independent living services program, if they are or were in DSS foster care on or after their 13 th birthday. They remain eligible up until their 21 st birthday regardless of their permanency status.
2d. Extended eligibility for education & training vouchers to children who exit foster care to kinship at 16 or older (those adopted after 16 were already eligible)	As a result of the legislation, North Carolina has extended ETV to youth who are placed in kinship guardianships.
3. Coordinated health services	
3a. States are required to develop a plan for the ongoing oversight and coordination of health services for children in foster care	A plan for coordinated health services for children in foster care has been submitted to the federal Children's Bureau. The key part of the plan is an effort to enroll all children in care into Carolina Access/CCNC for a managed care medical home. For more information on CA/CCNC, go to < http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fpv14n2/medhome.htm >.
4. Improved educational stability and opportunities	
4a. Case plans must ensure the educational stability of the child in foster care (i.e., must show efforts to ensure that children remain in the same school whenever possible or are enrolled in an appropriate new school immediately)	This provision has been fully implemented. North Carolina's Family Services Agreement for children in foster care was amended as of March 2010 to include this information.
4b. States rare equred to show that children are full-time students or are incapable of attending school due to a documented medical condition	This is already part of North Carolina policy and practice.
5. Incentives/assistance for adoption	
5a. Expanded number of families eligible for adoption assistance (no longer income or resource restrictions)	This provision is being phased in over the next eight years, so increasing numbers of families will become eligible.
5b. States are required to inform prospective adoptive parents of the federal adoption tax credit available to support the adoption of special needs children	This provision has been fully implemented. North Carolina's Adoption Assistance Agreement and related policy were revised in April 2009 to include this information.
6. Federal resources for Indian Tribes	
6a. Funding and technical assistance to tribes to operate their own foster care and adoption programs	The Eastern Band of the Cherokee, the only federally-recognized tribe based in our state, has informed North Carolina it will not develop its own child welfare system at this time.

Life changing New Year resolutions every foster parent should make

by Crystal Killion

Foster parenting is both a worthwhile endeavor and a tough job. Make some resolutions that will make it even more rewarding and life changing in the new year.

This is the time of year that many people begin to think about what they want to accomplish in the next year. Lose weight, stop smoking, spend more frugally. As important as these things are, foster parents have an amazing opportunity to influence others and to make a difference into the next generation and beyond. This year, make some resolutions for the new year that will change lives. In the coming year resolve to

Make a Lasting Bond

Make a lasting bond with your foster children. Bonding with these kids can be tough. The longer they have been in the system, the harder it will be to bond with them. It may be impossible. However, everyone benefits when you try. Spend time one-on-one, work together on their lifebook, make it a point to compliment them about something each day, never criticize their birth family, write a short note of encouragement to them or draw a simple picture for a young child. Small things add up to a lot for these children.

Advocate

Advocate for them. As a foster parent, you are with them more than any other person in their life right now. Be their voice with

their social workers, therapists, school personnel. Write a letter to the judge who oversees their case and give him or her a progress report.

Take Care of Yourself

Take time for you, your marriage, and your birth/adoptive children. Foster parenting is stressful and often thankless. Taking care of yourself and your family will help to prevent burn-out and, in the long run, help the foster children who come into your home, too.

Self-Improvement

Make time for self-improvement. Take a college class, learn how to do something you have always wanted to do but didn't, read a novel, join a gym. Children learn by example and your enthusiasm for learning will be contagious.

Recruit New Foster Families

Recruit another family to become foster parents. According to Family to Family of Orange County California, in an article titled, *Background: The Current Challenges of Public Child Welfare*, they estimate that over 550,000 children are currently in the foster care system; however, at the same time, they say that only 50% of those children will be placed in foster families due to the low number of foster homes available. When you recruit other loving families for these children,

Fourteen-year-old male, homeless and hungry

by Jeanne J. Preisler

One morning in late December 2009, in the comfort of his home in Nashville, singer/songwriter Jimmy Wayne's mind flashed to when things were not so good. He remembered when he was 14, homeless and hungry. The memory is clear and he knows there are thousands of kids today in that same situation.

Jimmy Wayne survived a turbulent, abusive childhood. He was shuttled to a series of foster homes. He was a teen living by his wits on the street until a North Carolina couple named Russell and Beatrice Costner took him in and gave him a family. Before Russell and Bea, Jimmy was homeless and close to hopeless. He remembers vividly the feeling of being without a family, without a home.

One memory includes the kindness of a man behind the counter of the convenience store who gave him a honey bun and a Cheerwine when he asked for something to eat. One random day, a man just working his normal shift made a choice. He chose to give a 14-year-old kid some food. In turn, he gave that kid hope.

Back in his warm house, Jimmy thought, "I haven't done anything this year to give back." He immediately decided to do something bold. He decided to walk across

America to raise awareness of the plight of homeless youth who have aged out of foster care with nowhere to go. He called the effort "Meet Me Halfway" because he wants all of us in America to help end teen homelessness. "I am asking you to meet me halfway," Jimmy said, "by getting involved—donate money, adopt a kid, learn more about the foster child/foster parent program in your local community. There's so much one person can do, and so many ways they can make a difference. It just takes one person to help someone to a better life."

Seven months and 1,700 miles later, Jimmy finished his walk from Tennessee to Arizona. He shares some of the images from his journey...

- The sting of crystallized snow blowing in my face.
- The sunburn on my calves.
- The blisters, bruises, and endless pain on the bottoms of my feet.
- The smell of smog and sewage in the cities and greasy alleys.
- The monuments, the neon lights.
- The sirens. The rooster crowing.
- The smell of cattle manure and wood burning stoves.
- The dew in the cotton and corn fields.

Catching Memories

by Kodi, age 17

We catch so many things in our life
Like bugs, and balls, bad colds
Someone special's attention
We even sometimes "Catch a Hint"
But my favorite thing to catch is memories



I'll catch them in the net of my heart and mind
Put them in a jar
On my windowsill at night
And call them fireflies

Read more of Kodi's poem online at www.fosteringperspectives.org/fpv15n1/kids_pages_v15n1.htm

you touch countless lives. Every child deserves a family.

Be a Mentor

Mentor a new foster parent. You were there once. You know that foster parenting can be a lonely road to travel. Make an effort to connect with another foster family to mentor and to listen.

Don't Quit

Be committed as long as it takes. Foster children need somebody who won't give up. Resolve to be that person for them.

- The vast desert. The scarecrows.
- The freedom of being alone.
- The company of solitude.
- The great, great, great people.
- The true meaning of hospitality.

Jimmy began his journey on January 1, 2010 and finished on August 1. Less than five miles from the finish line, Jimmy shattered the back of his right ankle, but that didn't stop him. With a brace on his leg, Jimmy pressed on to the finish line.

Now it's our turn to continue his journey. Keep spreading the word about this critical issue and how we can make a difference.

To donate \$10, text the word FOSTER to 85994. Visit www.projectmhm.org for more information.



Jimmy Wayne



NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

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

From the Association's President

by Stacey Darbee



Meet the 2010/2011 Board of Directors!

Officers: President, Stacey Darbee; Secretary, Aaryn Fazakerly; Treasurer, Paul Roodhuyzen; Historian, Angel Myers

Region 1: VP, Wanda Douglas; members: Co-Wefa Lyda, Terry Cross, Crystal Merritt

Region 2: VP, Joanne Light; members: Julia McInnis, Paul Roodhuyzen, Angel Myers

Region 3: VP, [vacant]; members: Stacey Darbee, Tammy Mitchell, Sandra Williams-Ayers

Region 4: VP, Chris Powers; members: Aaryn Fazakerly, Chip Thompson

NCFAPA and Region 2 extend a warm welcome to Angel Myers, the newest member of the Board. Angel has jumped in with both feet! And we are happy to welcome back Crystal Merritt. She just couldn't stay away! Sincere thanks to outgoing board member Kim Stewart for her years of service. We wish you luck in your future endeavors. Board elections will be held at the next NCFAPA Education Conference in April 2011. Each region of the state will have opportunities to vote. If you are interested in becoming a member of this working board please go to www.ncfapa.org and fill out a board application.

2010 Awards (Presented at 2010 Conference)

Parents recognized by NCFAPA for their *Magical Moments in Outstanding Parenting* are Johnny & Dujana Bostick (nominated by Richmond County DSS), Sammie & Lawanda Clemmons (nominated by Easter Seals UCP) and John & Dixie Painter (nominated by Grandfather Homes). We're proud to have them as members!

The Karen Taylor McLeod Advocacy Award is awarded only when NCFAPA feels there is someone who has been an extraordinary support and advocate for our families. In 2010 this award was given to Ms. Karen LeClair for her unwavering dedication to NC's foster and adoptive families. Karen is the consummate professional

with a passion for NCFAPA and its families. We are honored to have her in our corner!

Every person reading this knows some amazing parents. Don't wait: submit a nomination for foster parent(s) of the year and adoptive parent(s) of the year. ACT NOW! Just go to www.ncfapa.org and fill out the nomination form. No stamps necessary.

2011 Conference Announced!

Can you dig it?! April 15-17, 2011 NCFAPA will present the 13th Annual Education Conference: *Peace, Love & Family...Growing Groovy Families*. This cool scene will be happening at the Renaissance Suites Charlotte. Come crash at our pad. We have some FAB workshops, way cool entertainment, and even some time to chill. So drag out your funky threads and trip on down to Charlotte. Buzz on over to www.ncfapa.org to get the scoop and register. We promise you'll be blown away! Peace out.

Legislative News

In July 2010 Governor Perdue signed HB 1682 which states that corporal punishment shall not be administered on a student with a disability if that child's parent has stated in writing that corporal punishment shall not be used on that child. After this bill was signed several more counties banned the use of corporal punishment in their schools.

Information of Note

When a child is adopted from the NC foster care system they are eligible to receive Medicaid. This Medicaid is tied to funding that is available along with adoption subsidy (assistance).

At this time NC ends all adoption assistance at age 18. This effectively also ends Medicaid coverage even if the child is still in high school. Families are left with the task of applying for SSI or finding other insurance for the child.

NCFAPA is advocating for a change in this policy and investigating the ramifications. If you have a child nearing their 18th birthday, be proactive about continuing their insurance coverage. We will advocate for change but can only effect that change with your help. Look for more information from us on our website and via e-mail.

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, 2609 ATLANTIC AVE., SUITE 105, RALEIGH, NC 27604. 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.

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

Last name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

County: _____ Licensing Agency: _____

Home phone: () _____ E-mail: _____

Membership Amt. included: _____ Donation Amt.: _____

- 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?

The Family Support Network of North Carolina is made up of local affiliates and a University Office providing:

- Information & Referral
- Education & Outreach
- Parent-to-Parent Support
- Research & Evaluation

800.852.0042, www.fsnncc.org

Hablamos español

 **Family Support Network of North Carolina**
Serving families since 1985 through a network of affiliated local programs

Tell us what you think about foster parent training in NC!

The Division of Social Services is surveying licensed North Carolina foster parents to help evaluate training for foster parents. Your feedback is extremely important because it will help us better understand the training experiences and needs of North Carolina's foster families. If more than one foster parent lives in your home, we hope each one will complete a survey. There are two ways to complete the survey:

- Take the survey online by going to <http://tinyurl.com/29tvuy3>
- OR, you can complete the survey below and mail it Mellicent Blythe, Jordan Institute for Families, UNC-CH School of Social Work, CB# 3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550.

(**Note: only licensed NC foster parents are eligible to complete this survey.**) Please complete this survey by **DECEMBER 10, 2010**. Thank you.

1. What kind of foster care are you licensed to provide? (check one)
 - Traditional family foster care
 - Therapeutic foster care
 - Both therapeutic and family foster care
2. What kind of agency do you work for? (check one)
 - Private child-placing agency
 - County DSS
3. How long have you been a licensed foster parent?
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - More than 10 years
4. How many foster children have you cared for in your time as a licensed foster parent?
 - None
 - 1-5
 - 6-10
 - 11-19
 - 20+

Pre-Service Training

Please answer the following questions about the training you received **before** becoming a licensed foster parent (pre-service training).

5. What foster parent pre-service training did you receive?
 - MAPP/GPS
 - Deciding Together*
 - PRIDE
 - Other. Please provide name:
6. How useful was the pre-service training in helping you decide whether fostering was right for you?
 - Not at all useful
 - Somewhat useful
 - Useful
 - Very useful
7. How effective was pre-service training at preparing you to care for children in foster care?
 - Not at all effective
 - Somewhat effective
 - Effective
 - Very effective

If you answered "Not at all effective" or "Somewhat Effective," why did you find the foster parent pre-service training less than effective?
8. Overall, how satisfied were you with the pre-service training you received?
 - Very dissatisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 - Somewhat satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Very satisfied

If you did NOT respond "satisfied" or "very satisfied," please explain your answer:
9. If you are licensed to provide therapeutic foster care, what training did you receive for the **additional 10 hours of pre-service** required for therapeutic foster parents?
 - Not applicable: I do not provide therapeutic foster care
 - The curriculum *Becoming a Therapeutic Foster Parent*
 - Other curriculum. Please provide name:
 - I don't know
10. In your opinion, what are the five (5) most important topics that should be part of foster parent pre-service training?
 - Deciding whether fostering is right for them at this time
 - Ensuring children's safety
 - Understanding their own family's strengths and needs in relation to fostering
 - Supporting the child's permanency plan
 - Helping a child develop or maintain contact/attachment with birth family
 - Implementing shared parenting/maintaining connections
 - Managing children's behaviors
 - Developing cultural competence
 - Other. Please list:

A Chance to Win \$100 Award

We will award \$100 to one (1) randomly selected survey respondent. For a chance to win, you must be a foster parent licensed in NC and you must share the following :

First Name: _____ Last Name: _____

Address: _____

E-mail: _____

If you would prefer not to share this information with us, we hope you will still complete the survey—your participation is very important.

In-Service Training

Please answer the following questions about foster parent **in-service** training (the additional 10 hours of training required each year **after** you are licensed).

11. Which of these have you done for in-service training credit? (check all that apply)
 - Attended training events led/sponsored by our agency
 - Attended workshops offered by other organizations
 - Attended online training
 - Participated in annual NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Assoc. conference
 - Read educational publications
 - Watched educational videos
 - Other. Please list:
12. I find it easy to obtain the in-service training that I need.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree

If you did NOT respond "agree" or "strongly agree" please explain why you do not find it easy to obtain in-service training:
13. In your opinion, what are the five (5) most important topics for foster parent in-service training?
 - Behavior management
 - Cultural competence
 - Grief, separation, and loss
 - Health/medical issues
 - Mental health
 - Sexualized behavior
 - Shared parenting/maintaining connections
 - Substance abuse
 - Teaching independent living skills
 - Visits between children and birth parents
 - Working with the schools
 - Other. Please list:
14. Which of the following strategies has your agency used to encourage foster parents to attend in-service training? (check all that apply)
 - Made it practical & useful
 - Offered child care
 - Offered financial or other incentives
 - Offered refreshments/meals
 - Reimbursed travel expenses
 - Used foster parents as co-trainers
 - Used foster parent input to determine training topics
 - Other. Please list:
15. Please share with us any additional comments you may have about in-service or pre-service training for North Carolina's foster parents:

Thank you very much for your time!



A reader asks ...

Is continued contact between adopted children and their relatives wise?

In reading profiles of waiting children, I've noticed there is often a request for the child to maintain contact after the adoption with a birth family member, such as a sibling or grandparent. What type of contact is allowed? Is that safe for the child and for adoptive families?

Each adoption is unique, especially those involving children in the foster care system. Unlike infant adoptions, the majority of foster children have knowledge about their birth families and memories of their life prior to entering foster care. Sibling groups often have a shared experience and tend to be concerned about each other, particularly when they are placed separately. Foster parents who adopt often have a relationship with birth parents long before the child becomes legally free for adoption.

It is common, particularly for older children, to want to maintain a relationship with one of more of their siblings (who may be adopted separately) or with grandparents or a favorite aunt or uncle. The child may see these adults as being emotionally supportive, even if they are unable to provide daily care for the child.

Depending on the people involved, this type of relationship can include anything from a yearly birthday card with photos to monthly visits at a park. For children in foster care, a more typical arrangement would consist of in-person visits with a grandparent at a park, or for teenagers, phone calls, Facebook contact, or e-mails with a sibling.

This type of relationship offers many benefits to the adopted child. Children find comfort in knowing that their siblings are safe and being cared for, and that their extended family knows they are safe as well. As children mature, they often have questions about why their birth parents were unable to meet their needs and may be able to get answers about their family of origin from these extended family members. This allows the child to mature with an honest assessment of their life story and be better able to resolve grief and loss issues.

There are some situations in which ongoing contact with extended family members is not appropriate. If the birth family member is unable to maintain a safe and supportive relationship with the child or attempts to disrupt or sabotage the adoptive placement, contact should be discontinued until a time when it is safe to resume. If being around the person causes the child trauma or increases their stress level, visits should also stop.

Each adoption is unique and how the child views their adoption changes as they mature. When considering this type of adoption, carefully explore how comfortable you and your family would be supporting this type of relationship and seek professional guidance as needed.

I'd like to send a Christmas gift to a waiting child I saw on an adoption website. Can you tell me how to send a gift for a particular child?

It is wonderful that you feel a connection with a particular child, but it can get surprisingly complicated trying to send a gift for a specific child. For safety reasons, the location of waiting children is kept confidential, so it would be impossible to send a gift directly to the child or their agency. While NC Kids often serves as an intermediary between the public and adoption agencies, we are not equipped to handle these types of exchanges. It can also be confusing to the child to receive a gift from someone who saw their photo on the Internet.

A better option is to contact your local DSS or private adoption agency and ask if they accept gifts for their foster children. Many offices have a staff member or volunteer group that helps coordinate gift giving during the holidays. They may be able to give you gift ideas or let you know the ages and gender of children still in need. Although your gift will remain anonymous, know that your generosity is appreciated and sure to put a smile on a child or teenager's face.

Response by Robyn Weiser, NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network. If you have a question about foster care or adoption in North Carolina, send it to us using the *Fostering Perspectives* contact information found in the box above.

It is common for adopted children to want to maintain a relationship with one of more siblings or other relatives.

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Newsletter Staff. John McMahon (Editor); Mellicent Blythe (Assistant Editor)

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

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

A Poem

by Aliyah

My shell is not like this
My eyes follow with delight
The shape of my life today
Starts with my family
I ran away and left my shell
Did not like my life
But now my family is here
Back in my life
Now it's back
I can be me
And be with my family

Fun
Amazing
Mine
In good care
Loveable
Youthful





SaySo Update

Wishes can come true!

by Nancy Carter, Executive Director, SaySo

Several months ago, Lauren Zingraff (SaySo Program Coordinator) came to me and asked "What is on your wish list for SaySo?"

Without hesitation, I told her my dream was to raise money to charter a bus to take SaySo youths and their adult chaperones to the National Independent Living Conference in Washington, DC. The conference, affectionately known as "Growing Pains," has been held all over the country for 23 years but never in North Carolina. Washington DC is close, drivable, and provides access to our nation's capital. What could be better?

With Lauren's help and the commitment of several adult chaperones and youths from American Children's Home and Pitt, Durham, Moore, Gaston, and Forsyth Counties, SaySo secured partial funding from the Fenwick Foundation to charter a Holiday Tours bus. The conference participants numbered over 500 from all over the US and Puerto Rico. North Carolina was well represented at this conference, with approximately 70 participants. SaySo commenced discussions with the National Foster Youth Alumni Association and the Virginia Project Life youth advocacy group. Ideas such as an exchange program with the youths in Virginia and starting a NC Alumni Chapter started to gain momentum.

SaySo Board members presented two very well received workshops, "Different Paths to Permanency" and "Youth Advocacy Options! Take Your Pick," creating repercussions for both adults and youth audience members. Adults were impressed with the honesty and insight of the presentation, while youths from other states buzzed about how to organize their own SaySo groups. The conference provided many "firsts" for our youth members: first time presenting, first time outside of North Carolina, first time in DC, and for many adults, the first time not driving their youths to an event!

Clearly the highlight of the trip was the visit to the Capital itself. On Tuesday, Sep-

tember 7, the SaySo group visited the National Mall with stops at the Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, and the WWII and Korean Memorials. By mid-afternoon, the group was treated to a White House tour by representatives of Senator Richard Burr's office. Our appreciation and thanks to Senator Burr's staff for their kindness and hospitality.

It goes without saying, the memories created on this trip will last a lifetime. Wishes can come true!

Other SaySo News

- In June the 2010-2011 Board of Directors participated in a team building ropes course and commissioning ceremony.
- On October 23, SaySo Chapters from around the state participated in Make A Difference Day, collecting new duffel bags for all youths in foster care in their area.
- Visit www.saysoinc.org for information about LINKS, SaySo events, educational tips, and ways to support SaySo.
- If you have a group who would benefit from hearing a SaySo presentation, please contact Lauren Zingraff (800/820-0001). SaySo has a number of different topics that can be presented.



Conference workshop presenters (l to r): Lauren, Sarah, Brittany, Erica



SaySo members and adult chaperones pose at the Capital in Washington, D.C.

Have You Heard about NC Reach?

Our state's NC Reach program provides college funding and support services to young people adopted from North Carolina DSS foster care after the age of 12 and those who age out of the system at 18. Benefits include:

- **Funding.** NC Reach provides last dollar funding after all federal, state, and private dollars have been applied, to ensure that students can meet the cost of attendance at community colleges or four-year public schools.
- **Mentoring.** Be matched with a volunteer online mentor based on your professional, academic, and 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 NC Reach staff; if they fall below a 2.0 GPA they are enrolled in a program for intensive academic support.
- **Internships.** NC Reach coaches students on finding and successfully applying for internships in their communities and across North Carolina.

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.



Foster care alumni attending college.

Photos courtesy Orphan Foundation of America.

- 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.

For more info or to enroll, visit www.ncreach.org.

NC Foster Care Facts

Between June 2004 and June 2007, 1,461 youths aged out of foster care in our state. Of these youths, 40% (n=582) had no employment income of any kind in the first year after they were emancipated. Keep in mind, some youth who age out of care may not participate in the workforce due to attending post-secondary school, disability, illness, or other reasons. Information comes from NC Employment Security Commission, and only includes covered employment in NC. (Source: Duncan et al., 2010)

Books on the nightstand

by Becky and Joe Burmester

In the evolution of our family, Becky continues to read a great deal, but in her pursuit of an RN, she is frequently consumed by topics on nursing and medicine. These topics are certainly applicable to fostering, but not necessarily of general interest. While Joe is not as prolific in his reading, he now has more time to prepare reviews than Becky. As a result, we are sharing the “byline” and trust that our collective thoughts and comments will help you use your valuable reading time to best advantage.

This time round we offer three books for your consideration, each offering a different perspective and all worth your investment of time.



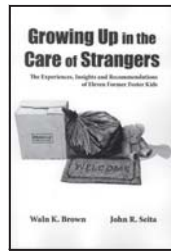
Help! I've Been Adopted

This book by Brenda McCreight speaks directly to kids who have been or are about to be adopted. Dr. McCreight identifies real topics that kids have to address when they move from the state of foster

children to the permanence of adoption. While it may have been a child's desire to be adopted, the reality of adoption brings with it confusing feelings and scary questions not previously understood. They now face such questions as “why do kids get adopted?”, “why do I feel grief and loss?”, “what is this attachment thing?” and “how do we adjust?” The book identifies specific questions that a child might ask (or want to ask) on each topic, along with an example of how a “real” person dealt with the issues in his or her own situation.

This would be an outstanding resource for a newly adopted child, but also for the family members who need to understand what their new child or sibling is feeling, and how they might help them through the transition. I think it would also be helpful to foster parents so we can assist our children who may be approaching adoption, whether into a new family or our own. As Dr. McCreight explains, and the examples illustrate, the fact that someone has done well as your foster child doesn't necessarily translate into an easy transition to becoming your adopted child.

The book is well written and only 83 pages long. Its topical nature would allow you to stop reading when it's time for you to place it on the nightstand and go to sleep—go ahead, try to stop!



Growing Up in the Care of Strangers

Compiled and edited by Waln K. Brown and John R. Seita, this was a tough book for me to read. It is a collection of the personal stories of 11 former foster kids, each written in the first person. It was

hard not because it was irrelevant or poorly written. On the contrary, I found it difficult because it was **so** personal that it both frightened and angered me. No child should have to endure the situations in which these children found themselves, nor should the foster care system that is intended to save and assist them respond in such an arbitrary manner. The good news is that, despite the trauma they faced and the subsequent failures of the foster care system, these children all survived, eventually thrived and are now contributing solutions to assist other children.

The 11 contributors describe their childhood, how they came into care, how they eventually grew into productive adults, and how they are now working to improve the foster care system that frequently failed them. Despite experiencing every type of abuse and neglect, and bouncing from family to family, these children are now all college-educated professionals. Admittedly, they are not a random sample of children from the foster care system, but they were selected to share their stories because they have survived and can now provide insights to improve that system. Each of these amazing individuals knows more about the practical impact of the foster care system on children than most of the professionals within the system who have not experienced being a recipient of services.

While the target audience for this book is child welfare professionals and youth in placement, foster parents and others associated with children need to understand the impact they have on children in care. These stories make that impact clear. There were a few (not many) conclusions and recommendations from the contributors with which I disagreed. But the positive result was that I had to actually think about those conclusions, rather than simply carry on with no understanding of the impact on children.

Perhaps this won't be as difficult for you to read as it was for me, but I'm glad I read it. These are certainly inspirational lives, and this book is an important contribution

to the appropriate understanding of anyone who cares about children in foster care. It should be required reading for the professionals who establish policy and those of us who provide services to children. The book is 175 pages long—bring a box of tissues.



We Are All Welcome Here

Some of you may read this book and wonder why it's included on a list for foster parents. It's not about foster children or adoption. But it's such a wonderful story about a mother and her child, living

through hard times and learning difficult lessons about other people, that I hope you'll take the time to read it. Actually I listened to this one on CD while driving across country—approximately 6 hours—an excellent way to enjoy a long drive.

Based on a true story, Elizabeth Berg has captured the feelings and experiences of a young girl born of an invalid mother, living in poverty, and learning the ugly truths of racism and prejudice. Yet this young girl ends up receiving an extraordinary gift that may not have been given to her in other circumstances. A beautiful and inspiring story, I am able to rationalize it as appropriate for foster parents because, after all, despite the “foster” in front of our titles, we are still the parents of these children. The lessons we provide to our children will last a lifetime, and the gifts we receive from them will encourage us to continue through the difficulties of parenting.

Becky's Note

These are all excellent resources. *Growing Up With Strangers* further emphasizes the importance of connections and the very real fact that young people who age out of care in our homes very much need to remain a part of our families. I have not yet read this entire book but have read several of the stories and the fact that they are difficult to read is the very reason that we need to read them.

In Closing

As I finish this column, Becky has fallen asleep with a 15 pound text book. I think I got the better part of this deal! Tell us what's on your nightstand and share what you are reading. Call us at 919/870-9968 or send email to becky.burmester@mindspring.com.



Help us find families for these children

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>



Brandon (age 16)

Brandon is quiet but has a winning smile. He takes great pride in his appearance and loves making new friends. Brandon loves to be outdoors where he enjoys riding his bike and playing basketball. He also likes listening to music, drawing, and baseball. Brandon plays the drums and would like to continue developing his musical talent.



Dwayne (age 15)

A friendly young man, Dwayne enjoys attention and seeks acceptance from his peer group as well as adults. He has a close bond with his older sister and her children, whom he enjoys visiting. He's also close to his current teacher and maintains ongoing relationships with those who have served as caretakers in his life. Dwayne enjoys being active, is creative, and displays artistic ability. He loves playing video and board games and watching sports on TV.



Ebony (age 16)

Ebony describes herself as a kind, generous person with a good sense of humor. She has a beautiful smile and loves to have fun and be silly. She hopes to work with animals one day. Ebony enjoys trips to the zoo, basketball, and watching the Disney Channel. Ebony would do best in a family where she is the youngest or only child. Ebony needs a two parent or single parent female who understands the challenges and rewards of parenting a child with disabilities, and is open to continuing visits with Ebony's younger sister, who was adopted separately.



J'aquaisha (age 13)

J'aquaisha gets excited about having a permanent family, but also struggles with accepting love and guidance from adults. She enjoys playing basketball, singing, and video games. Her favorite subjects in school are Math and PE. She dreams of becoming a pediatrician. J'aquaisha needs someone who can both nurture her and be firm with her when needed. Because she parented her younger siblings, J'aquaisha should be the only or youngest child in her adoptive family. Stability, structure, and love will round out the recipe for this girl's success.



Jaqueton (age 11)

Artistic, energetic, and determined, Jaqueton enjoys football, basketball and playing pool. His favorite subject in school is science. He likes singing in the choir and listening to rap music. When Jaqueton grows up, he would like to be an artist. Jaqueton attends regular classes at school and has a personal academic plan to help him be as successful as possible. He is a smart child and can easily complete tasks that interest him. Jaqueton will benefit from a one or two-parent adoptive family. Ideally, his adoptive parents will have experience raising teenagers and be comfortable managing behaviors, providing consistency, structure, and love.

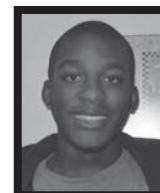


Joshaline (age 15)

Friendly, smart, and charming, Joshaline is popular at school, where she is a cheerleader, runs track, and participates in afterschool clubs. Her favorite channel is BET and she likes to listen to R&B music. Joshaline does well in school and typically makes A's and B's. She plans to attend college and major in social work. Her goal is to be independent and live a prosperous life.

Kasib (age 16)

Kasib is polite, agreeable, affectionate, and easy to please. He can be very gentle and kind and shows positive leadership skills, especially with the other kids in his home. Kasib is good at sports and enjoys soccer, basketball, track, and baseball. Kasib enjoys learning new things. The ideal family for Kasib will be consistent with routine, structure, and consequences. Kasib needs to maintain frequent visits and contact with his biological siblings, who are being adopted separately.



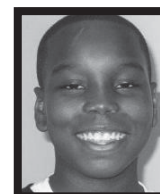
Lonnie (age 15)

Lonnie is a sociable, energetic, and curious young man. He gets along with peers, but relates best to adults. He takes a great deal of pleasure in talking with almost anyone who listens. Lonnie enjoys watching movies, playing basketball and video games, and researching various subjects on the computer. Church has been a strong and positive influence on him. Lonnie also enjoys expanding his social skills by traveling and shopping. It is Lonnie's greatest dream to be adopted and experience the love and joy of having his own family to love and nurture him.



Malik (age 14)

Malik is a funny, charming, adventurous young man. He enjoys science, sports, animals, and reading; he also likes to play video games, hang out with friends, attend youth ministry, and watch TV. In school, Malik receives resource assistance and has made tremendous progress, nearly making the honor roll. His teacher says he is very bright. Malik needs a two-parent family who can provide a highly structured environment with very clear expectations and boundaries. Malik has a sister who will be adopted separately; continuing contact between them is encouraged.



Samuel (age 16)

Sam is funny, perpetually happy and a joy to be around. He has an upbeat personality and loves to please and show respect for adults and authority. Sam, who describes himself as handsome and smart, has a great love of electronics and enjoys playing video games. He likes playing basketball and attending games or watching sports on TV; Sam has a great mind for sports trivia.



Ton'nica (age 15)

Ton'nica describes herself as fun, kind, and a good teacher. She is also extremely loyal, determined, and not afraid to express her opinion. Ton'nica is somewhat shy and would like to make more friends. She enjoys getting her hair and nails done and is into fashion and jewelry. Ton'nica likes to watch football and participate in cheerleading and stepping. She would like to become a kindergarten teacher.



Trevor (age 15)

Trevor has an engaging personality, an endearing sense of humor, and good verbal skills. He is an artist and hopes to have a career where he can use his artistic talents. He enjoys trips to the beach and theme parks. The ideal parents for Trevor will provide a structured routine with clear expectations. They will advocate for him in the school and community to ensure that he receives the services he needs. Trevor would like an adoptive family that will enjoy "doing stuff" and spending time with him. He is very close to his grandmother and will need to visit her periodically.



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:

What can your caregivers do to help you succeed when it is time for you to live as an independent adult?

DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 2, 2011

E-mail submissions to jdmcmaho@email.unc.edu 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. If sent via U.S. Mail, artwork should be sent flat (unfolded) on white, unlined paper.



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 919/334-1176.

In-Service Quiz, FP v15#1

1. Name five things social workers can do to support foster parents when it comes to parent-child visitation.
2. Describe four potential benefits of having frequent visits between children and their birth parents.
3. List five things foster parents can do to support children BEFORE visits and five things they can do to support children AFTER visits.
4. How did Darren's foster mom help him reunify? What might you do to have similarly successful relationships with birth parents?
5. In this issue, NC foster parents offer advice about parent-child visits. Which of their suggestions might you apply?
6. What are three ways foster parents can work with birth families during the holidays?
7. Crystal Killion makes several suggestions for New Year resolutions for foster parents. Which of her ideas sounds best to you?
8. Why did Jimmy Wayne walk half way across the country?
9. When and where will the next NC Foster and Adoptive Association conference be held? What steps can you take so that you can attend?
10. NC foster parents who respond to the survey in this issue have a chance to win \$100. What will you do with the money if you win?

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What Foster Parents Really Do!

By Marti, age 16

A foster child does not ever have to worry about where the next meal is going to come from or if they will get to lay down in a warm bed or have to sleep in a box in the cold. A foster child has the chance at a life that could have never been reached.

Take me, for example. . . . I count my lucky stars that I have people in my life that care about me and my well being enough to supply all my needs and most of my wants.

Foster parents spend a lot of time taking their child to and from counseling centers and doctor appointments. They also have monthly treatment teams and supervisions once a week, as well as a skill-building specialist that spends so many hours a week with that child. A foster parent has a lot to deal with on a weekly basis. . . . Personally, I think that they have to deal with a lot more than normal parents. . . .

Fostering gives parents a way to give back and change the life of a child. A child deserves to belong to a family who cares about them on so many levels. [Foster parents] do not try to replace the birth family. They try to give the child a better home. Childhood memories are something that can never be replaced.

Family helps define our very identity. This is why it is important to have parents in our lives that devote time, supply all our needs, and love us the way parents should. Family means believing, loving, and supporting each other. . . .

I wouldn't be half the daughter, student, or young lady I am today if it wasn't for the wonderful, gracious foster parents I have been placed with. Basically, foster parents are completely awesome.

Marti received an award of \$15 for having her essay published.

