

fostering perspectives

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Child and family team meetings can be golden opportunities

Child and family team meetings (CFTs) are meetings where DSS brings birth family members and their community supports together to create, implement, and update a plan with the child, youth, and family. CFTs are structured discussions that seek to ensure child safety and build on the strengths of the child, youth, and family and address their needs, desires, and dreams.

In the writing contest in the last issue of *Fostering Perspectives* we asked children and youth in foster care who they would invite to a child and family team meeting, and why.

In response, they said they'd invite their parents, siblings, aunts, friends, social workers, teachers, resident counselors, GALs, and others.

By itself, this list might seem unremarkable. But the reasons these children and teens want these supporters at their meetings are eye-opening and profound.

For example, one young lady wants her brother present at her CFT because he "is a U.S. Marine and, more importantly, my hero."

Another wishes her mother could be there because "she knows all about me, she loves me, and she knows me like the back of her hand." This young woman's mother can't attend a CFT because she is in prison.

Another wants his "real dad" there so he can learn more about him.

Hearing these young people speak out reminds me why CFTs are so valuable. These meetings are more than just 1-2 hour, mandatory events to make sure policy is met. They are *golden opportunities* for children and youth to gain understanding of what is happening in their lives and to share with the people who care for them what they are thinking, feeling, and want to happen.

CFTs are connectors, helping young people bind together their past with their future. They are the link which holds them to the people most important to who they are, and who they want to be.

CFTs are a source of illumination. They reveal ways to provide young people the chance they need to realize their dreams.

Jenny King is a Training Coordinator and Trainer for the Center for Family and Community Engagement at NC State University.



Jenny King

WRITING CONTEST: Who Would You Invite to a CFT, and Why?



Donisha, age 17

A child and family team meeting is for updates and to let anything new be said. A child can arrange his/her own CFT meeting if he/she feels it is necessary. The child is able to invite whomever they please—it could be anyone from relatives, teachers, counselors, to preachers.

My GAL will make sure I understand everything and my voice is heard.

I would make sure I had all the right people there to make things run smoothly. My social worker, her supervisor (sometimes), my foster mom, and a facilitator would be there.

For a CFT to actually feel like a CFT, **my sisters** and my Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteer would have to be there. Why? Simple. If there is any unpleasant thing said, I want other people such as my sisters to hear it so that they know exactly who said it and what it means. I want **my GAL** there to make sure I understand everything that is being said and my opinion is heard at the table. Not only does she speak up for me in court, but she does it whenever she feels like I might not be able to say everything that I want to, which is why she is a necessary person to my CFT.

Lastly, I want a **facilitator** to be there. Yes, they say a facilitator should always be there, but there have been times where the only one facilitating my meeting was my GAL. I believe in order to have order while unpleasant things are said, someone should be there to make sure everyone understands and my voice is heard. *Donisha received \$100 for winning first prize in the writing contest.*



Alexandria, age 12

I would invite **Jessica**. We use BFFNMWHIL. It means Best Friends Forever, No Matter What Happens In Life. . . .

Randy and Lisa took care of me when my stepdad's power was cut off. They love me with all their hearts.

I would like my **grandma** to come because she has had my brother since he was seven months old. She was also there for me. . . .

I would like a couple of my good friends from my home town to come. . . . **Randy and Lisa** took care of me when my stepdad's power was cut off. They love me with all of their hearts.

I would like all these people that care about me to come to my team meetings because I know a lot about them and they know a lot about me, such as my likes, my dislikes, and mostly my whole life, because I trusted them a lot. I also felt safe around them and I knew that they trusted me and felt safe around me. *Alexandria received \$50 for winning second prize.*

WRITING CONTEST: Who Would You Invite to a CFT, and Why?



Lazavia, age 10

I would like **my aunt** to come because I may go live with her in the future. She would also want to know how I am doing here and learn more about me. She cares about me and takes me places and I love her. She is a wonderful aunt. . . .

I would like **my teacher** to come because she knows how I am doing at school and what I need help on. She knows what I love to do in school. She is a wonderful teacher. She helps us with everything and can help make decisions.

Thank you for considering who I would like to come to my team meeting. These are the important people who can work together to make the best plans for my future. *Lazavia's letter won third prize, for which she was awarded \$25.*

My teacher knows how I am doing at school. She helps with everything and can help make decisions.

Christina, age 11



"Even though I'm young, people should let me speak for myself."

Christina received \$15 for having her work published.

People I would invite to my CFT

If I could choose one person to be at my meeting, it would be my mom. **My mom** knows all about me, she loves me, she knows my past like the back of her hand, and I lived with her all my life. . . . My mother is in prison so I have not got to see her yet. . . . If my mom were out of prison, I would be at home.

—Blake, age 13

If I could pick one person to come to my meeting, it would be **my brother, Nathan**. Nathan is a U.S. Marine and, more importantly, my hero. —Sierra, age 16

I'd invite **my real dad**. . . I do not know a whole lot about my real dad. I have been told that I act just like my dad, and if he came to my meeting, he would tell me more about himself. This would help me in the meeting because I need to know about him; I would be happier if I could talk with my dad. —Chris, age 16

I would invite **my social worker** to the meeting because he has been supportive to me and he has helped me to gain overnight stays with my family, which I have not had (until recently) since I lived with my mom back in 2004. He is also supportive in the reunification of me and my family once all the issues at home are taken care of. —Caleb, age 17

I would invite **the family that wanted to adopt me**. I think you should know who you are going to be with. . . . **My sister** should be able to come because she could help me make a decision, and afterward we could go in a different room to see if we really want to be with the family that wants to adopt us. —Leeann, age 11

Meetings bring back a small portion of being able to take charge of at least a few things in my own life. . . . **My aunt** would be nice to see in the meeting, because she actually has the option and I have yet to see her at any of my meetings. I also think it would be nice to hear her opinion every now and then. . . . My aunt would set things in motion and make sure they happen, all the while promoting my thoughts. —Jessie, age 16

My GAL has been right by my side for almost four years now. Every CFT, court date, even a performance at church. If I could give him a best grandpa award, I totally would! He is like the fantastic grandfather I never had. One of the many things I like most about Jim is he is STRAIGHT UP. He doesn't hold back and says what he needs to say. He always keeps my best interest in mind and makes CFTs a little bit better for me. —Nikki, age 16

I'd invite **my previous resident counselors**, Josh and Jamie, because they care about me and my future. I tell them everything. I have a special connection with them. —Dalton, age 11

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

Melanie, age 14

My social worker. She keeps her word. She is always there for me when I need her. She is compassionate and kindhearted. I know she will help me get my goals met.

I've known her for a year and a half. I know she will listen to what I have to say. She will give out her opinions and help me accomplish my goals. I have grown a healthy relationship with her. She tells me that if I need anything that I need to make sure to contact her. Whenever I need her, she will be there. She will make sure I accomplish my goals. *Melanie received \$15 for having her work published.*

My social worker keeps her word. She's always there for me.

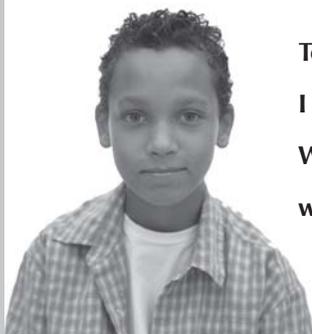
Tiffany, age 14

I need a supportive person at my meetings to help me get through the hurtful things that are said. I want them to help me feel good about myself and help me do the right things in life and not mess up like I have in the past. . . .

I'd like to invite **my mom** to my meetings. . . . Some may say she would not be a good support person to have, because of what has happened to me in my life, and what people have done to me, plus her not being there for me when I needed her, like when I was getting abused. I would say that my mom is a great support person for me. She is my mom. No matter what has happened, she is there for me now. That is all that I need from her. My mom has changed a lot. She is a great support person for me to have now. *Tiffany received \$15 for having her work published.*

No matter what happened, my Mom is there for me now. That's all I need from her.

Noah, age 11



**To my child and family team meeting
I would invite Mom, Dad, and Aunt Char.
Why? Because they are the only ones
who listen carefully.**

Noah received \$15 for having his work published.

What you should know about CFTs in North Carolina

Unless otherwise noted, this article is based on chapter seven of the *North Carolina Family Support and Child Welfare Services Manual (2012)*.

The use of child and family team meetings (CFTs) is an essential strategy in North Carolina's child welfare system. To realize the potential benefits of these meetings—for children, families, and themselves—every foster parent should have a firm grasp of how CFTs work and how to contribute to their success.

Definition

CFTs are meetings during which members of families involved in the child welfare system and their community supports come together to create a plan for the child that builds on the family's strengths, desires, and dreams and addresses the needs identified during the child protective services (CPS) assessment. Families often have more than one child and family team meeting.

CFTs are structured, guided discussions with the family and other team members about family strengths, needs, and problems and the impact they have on the safety, permanence, and well-being of the family's children. CFT meetings always have a clear but open-ended purpose. They always involve options or decisions for the family to make and they always involve the family in developing specific safety plans and in lining up services and supports.

Who Attends

North Carolina policy requires agencies to engage every family receiving involuntary child welfare services in the CFT process.

A CFT meeting usually includes parents, the child (if appropriate), other concerned family members, members of the community identified by the family as part of their support network, a facilitator, the social worker, any relevant service providers, and foster parents or other care providers (if the child is in out-of-home care).

General CFT Process

The CFT process has four stages:

1. Referral. In some agencies a request for a CFT is referred to a designated CFT coordinator, who then schedules the meeting and

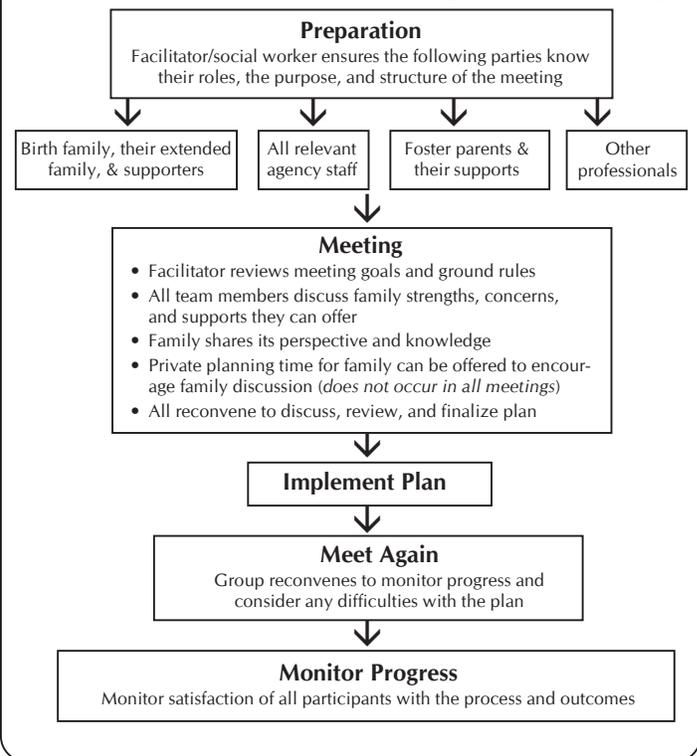
makes arrangements with a trained facilitator. The referral process may involve a meeting between the family's social worker and the facilitator to ensure they both understand the purpose of the meeting and any safety concerns or special considerations.

2. Preparation. It usually falls to the family's social worker to make sure that everyone who will attend the CFT understands the CFT process, why the meeting is being held, and how he or she is expected to contribute. Identifying and engaging team members early on is key to a meeting's success. The social worker and parents should work together and contact potential team members to explain the purpose of CFT and invite them to the meeting.

3. The Meeting. CFTs typically begin with introductions followed by a review of the purpose of the meeting. Often the family is given the opportunity to start the meeting off—for example, with a poem, prayer, or song that

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Overview of a Child and Family Team Meeting



Benefits of CFTs: What the Research Says

Studies in the United States and elsewhere have found that holding family meetings is associated with:

- Identifying and engaging the natural networks of children, youth, and their families to widen the circle of supports (Pennell & Anderson, 2005);
- Including white, minority, indigenous, and Hispanic/Latino populations in a culturally respectful manner (Glode & Wein, 2007; Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carlton-LaNey, & Weil, 2004; Rotabi, et al., 2012);
- Encouraging the participation of children and youth and creating circles of support for youth leaving care (Crampton & Pennell, 2009; Merkel-Holguin, Tinworth, & Horner, 2007);
- Involving fathers or the paternal side of the family in planning (Pennell, 2006; Veneski & Kemp, 2000);
- Involving families and their informal supports in meaningful and participatory decision-making processes (Pennell, 2006);
- Raising family satisfaction with child welfare services, improving family-worker relationships (Duke University, 2006, 2007; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003), and decreasing adversarial court hearings (Burford, Pennell, & Edwards, 2011);
- Generating plans that are written in a way that reflects the family's culture (Thomas, Berzin, & Cohen, 2005) and encompass a wide range of children's needs that would not normally be included in case plans, such as attendance at church (Titcomb & LeCroy, 2005);
- Creating concurrent plans that place children with relatives while working on returning them to their parents, but with the relatives available to provide long-term care as needed (Desmeules, 2003);
- Keeping siblings together, stabilizing placements, maintaining children in their homes or reunifying families, placing children and teens with relatives or 'like family,' returning children from kinship care to their parents more quickly, and keeping these young people connected with their communities and cultural groups (Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003; Morris, 2007; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2005; Walker, 2005);
- Decreasing the overrepresentation of children of color and Hispanic children in foster and institutional care (Crampton & Jackson, 2007; Sheets et al., 2009);
- Achieving these results while increasing the safety of the children (Gunderson, Cahn, & Wirth, 2003) and their mothers (Pennell & Burford, 2000) or without substantially affecting children's safety (Berzin, 2004; Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004); and
- Achieving these results without raising costs (Pennell, 2005).



Dr. Joan Pennell

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What you should know about CFTs from page 3

unites the family. This is followed by a review of the ground rules for the meeting and an information sharing phase, during which family members and others discuss the family's strengths, needs, and problems. The team then comes together to make the family's plan, creates plans for following up after the meeting, and adjourns (NCSOC, 2007).

4. Follow-up. Following up allows for changes when a plan is not working. It is more important to acknowledge the need for a revision in a plan than to continue to support something that isn't helping the family (NCSOC, 2007).

CFT Roles

Birth Parents. Family members' task in meetings is to honestly examine their strengths, needs, and problems and to come up with a plan that will enable them to provide safe care for their children.

Child Welfare Worker. It is the family's social worker's job to educate and empower the family about CFTs and encourage them to participate fully. Workers must help families understand that it is **their** meeting and that, regardless of the meeting's specific focus, the intent is to help them come up with **their** plan.

Workers must obtain input from the parents as to who they want to attend the CFT.

During CFT meetings social workers and everyone else must communicate openly and directly (subject to the limits of confidentiality). Full disclosure is the goal.

Facilitator. The facilitator's job is to manage the meeting, making sure all points of view are heard and all participants under-

When Are CFT Meetings Held for Children in Foster Care?

For children and youth who are coming into care after having been served in In-Home services, a team should already have been formed, though there will be new members who join the team to support them. A CFT meeting shall be held at the following times after children enter foster care:

- Within 30 days of coming into care
- Within 60 days of coming into care
- Within 90 days after the 60-day meeting, not more than 150 days after coming into care
- Every 6 months thereafter
- When there is a change in the plan or family and it is necessary to reconvene the team.

These timeframes are the same as the requirements for the Permanency Planning Action Team (PPAT) meeting. As the case progresses, the team may change, especially if the primary goal changes.

If reunification is no longer the goal, CFT meetings shall still be held. A broad definition of family should be used in these cases and children/youth should always be consulted as to whom they would like to have on their team. This is especially important if birth parents no longer attend meetings.



stand what is being discussed. The facilitator encourages the team to generate creative ways to keep children safe and maintain family attachments, while building consensus among the group.

According to NC policy, CFTs that occur while the family has a "high" or "intensive" risk rating **must** use facilitators (unless they involve case closure).

Facilitators should receive special training in leading CFTs. Agencies should avoid asking individuals from within the agency who are directly connected with the family's case (e.g., the family's social worker's supervisor) to facilitate CFTs.

Other Participants. The role of other CFT participants, whether they are extended family members, friends, foster parents, or helping professionals, is to communicate openly, respectfully, and directly and to actively contribute to the family's effort to create a plan

that meets their needs and keeps their children safe. To succeed in this role, other participants rely on the social worker to help them understand their role and the CFT process. This underscores how important it is social workers devote time to preparation.

When to Hold CFTs

CFTs should be convened by the child welfare worker to develop or update the In Home Family Services Agreement, any time a significant decision is to be made that impacts the child or family, or any time there is reason to believe that there is a need to discuss a child's health, safety, or permanence. For more on timeframes when children are in foster care, see box above.

To Learn More

See Chapter VII: Child and Family Team Meetings <<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-55/man/>>

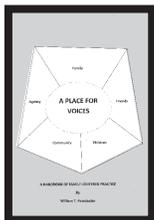


Books on the Nightstand

A CFT resource you should know about

by Becky Burmester

As a foster parent, I have attended many child and family team meetings (CFTs) without actually understanding what they were supposed to be about. After reading more about CFTs, I realize that while sometimes those meetings were very productive, too often I and other attendees left wondering why we had come out to accomplish nothing. The good news? It need not be that way.



A Place for Voices

A Place for Voices: A Handbook of Family-Centered Practice, by William "Billy" Poindexter, is a 100-page guide aimed at improving CFTs by clearly explaining the entire meeting process.

Although written for social workers, their su-

pervisors, and meeting facilitators, foster and kinship parents can learn from this book.

For example, I learned foster parents can ask that meetings be scheduled at times that work for them. In my experience, foster parents are sometimes an afterthought when it comes to scheduling CFTs. Meeting schedules should also make sense for children as well.

A Place for Voices gave me a better grasp of what I should expect from CFTs. I learned I could ask in advance what the purpose of the meeting is and expect a concise answer. (If a short, clear answer isn't forthcoming, expect a frustrating meeting!)

This book also taught me that Joe and I could have done more to prepare the older children and teens we fostered for CFTs. Sharing the purpose of the meeting prior to the event would have given these young people a

chance to gather their thoughts and ideas and helped them have a more positive CFT.

Another thing we did not do that we would do today is ask the family what we could do to support their relationship with their child.

It's clear to me that CFTs can be an important tool in establishing good working relationships with everyone involved in the care of a child. But I now also know that effective meetings don't just happen—they require training and planning.

A Place for Voices can help. The book, which sells for \$25, can be obtained by contacting Billy Poindexter at 828-695-4521 or billy@catawbacountync.gov.

What's on your nightstand? Contact me at 919/870-9968 or at becky.burmester@mindspring.com. And keep reading!

Successful CFTs: What foster parents can do to help

As this issue of *Fostering Perspectives* makes clear, child and family team meetings are important. Here are a few ways you can help ensure their success.

Understand your role. CFTs focus on children in foster care and their families, but as a foster parent you **do** have an important part to play. Precisely what that part is will depend on the family's situation and the purpose of the meeting. If you are unsure, ask the person who called the meeting to clarify your role for you.

Support the children. As the box at right indicates, CFTs can stir up a lot of anxiety. You are in an excellent position to help young people to prepare emotionally for these meetings. Foster parents can help by asking children how they feel about the upcoming CFT. As you discuss their feelings, make sure they understand the purpose of the meeting, who has been invited, and their own role.

Help children understand that being present at a CFT that concerns them is their right, not a privilege. If they want to be there, they have the right to be heard. If they do not want to participate or there is some reason why full participation is not possible, find out how they want their voice, thoughts, and ideas shared as part of the meeting.

Be prepared to step out of the room. If you are asked to leave the CFT at some point, don't take it too personally. It is important for children and families to be able to speak freely about their concerns, even those that pertain to your home.

Think shared parenting. Although most foster parents will have already met the birth family as part of shared parenting, CFTs offer another great opportunity to build a relationship with and obtain information from the child's parents. The box below offers good reminders of what birth families want and need from others when it comes to CFTs. Always ask the family what you can do to support their relationship with their child.

Speak up about scheduling. Those scheduling and planning CFTs should allow foster parents to have some input about when and where CFTs take place. Foster parents should not be shy on this point—ask for what you want; if you don't get it, be understanding.

Think next steps. Help everyone remember how important it is for children to be involved in what happens AFTER the meeting. With social workers and others, help young people in care understand what part they can play as the plan moves forward.

The Bottom Line

CFTs allow foster parents to be there when important information is discussed and service agreements are made and reviewed. This allows them to be part of the reunification effort, or whatever the child's permanent plan is. The bottom line? CFTs are a great way for foster parents to stay up-to-date and to be active, contributing members of the team serving the family and child.

How Do Youth in Foster Care Feel Before a CFT?

Afraid, homesick, and hopeful are the emotions I feel at my team meeting. —Dalton, age 11

My first [meeting] was very scary because I did not know what was going to happen in the end. I felt very anxious, worried, and sad. Personally, I feel like there is mostly bad news at my [meeting], but sometimes there is good news. That good news is giving me the drive to go on until my dad is ready for us to move in with him. —Blake, age 13



I **hate** CFT meetings. I hate the "all eyes on me" feeling. I also hate the embarrassed feeling you have when you have to explain why you're in trouble. Most of all I hate knowing it's some people's **job** to be there, knowing they get paid to listen to things about me and make decisions with me. —Nikki, age 16

I sometimes get scared when I am about to go into my meetings, because I do not know what the team is going to say or if they are going to move me. Sometimes I am happy to meet because I have important things to talk about. Sometimes I am so excited to see the people who are in my meeting that I just can't sit still. —Tiffany, age 14

Why do I get nervous when I hear that I have a [meeting]? I cannot express how I am really feeling, but I do have many emotions. My hands are shaky and I feel sick to my stomach. I don't know what's going to happen next. I feel like my future is being tossed around like a ball. I have questions that need to be expressed out loud. I have to face my fears. —Melanie, age 14

Meetings bring back a small portion of being able to take charge of at least a few things in my own life. —Jessie, age 16

I've had multiple CFTs with, in my opinion, all the wrong people. People like my aunt, my cousins, and family friends. I would sit and ask myself: why are all these irrelevant people here? —Amber, age 16

No one likes to come to team meetings! —Alexandria, age 12

What Birth Families Want from Child and Family Team Meetings

In focus groups North Carolina birth family members have said they want the following in connection with CFTs.

Before the Meeting

- Give me a chance to share my story
- Help me find my informal supports so they can come to the meeting
- Educate yourself about my child's illnesses or my situation, don't just say you don't know
- No surprises—make sure I know beforehand what we will be talking about at my meeting
- Don't have the meeting unless I can come
- Work with me to set up a time that I can be present at the meeting; be sensitive to my needs
- Recognize my feelings (e.g., angry, scared, tired of the mess)
- Help me understand my options and how the meeting works
- Listen to what I'm saying and explore why I am saying it

At the Meeting

- Allow me to introduce myself to the team
- Talk to me, not about me
- Monitor your tone of voice
- Call me by my name, not "mom," "dad," or "the youth"
- Make sure I have someone there I feel will support me
- Use words I can understand
- Use humor to make me feel safe
- Give me a chance to share my story
- Help me to meet my immediate needs first (e.g., housing, transportation, child care, food, lights)
- Remind me of my family's strengths and build on them
- Provide needed services, not just mandated services—don't waste time on services that won't help my family
- Know what the family has to do in all of the agency plans so we can come up with **one** plan
- Listen to my needs and my family's needs
- Use visual prompts so I can follow better
- Tell the truth

- Let me explain why I behave the way I do
- Let us speak more
- Be open to our questions and opinions
- Make the meeting more active and fun
- Everyone who says they'll attend must be there
- Ask for information—don't assume you know the answers
- Know that I'm doing what I know to do

"Speak to me and my child as if we're part of the solution, not like we are the problem."

After the Meeting

- Respect my confidentiality—don't talk about me to others
- Allow me the opportunity to call meetings when I feel I need to
- All team members need to be held accountable, not just the parents

Source: NCSOC, 2007



A kinship foster parent's perspective on CFTs

Interview by Billy Poindexter

For this interview I spoke with a grandparent who cares for three of her grandchildren, who are in

DSS custody. I'll call this woman "Peg" to protect her grandchildren's confidentiality.

The Situation

Peg's grandchildren are not biologically related to her; they are the children of her stepson's ex-wife. After she divorced Peg's stepson, the children's mother left them with friends so she could "do her thing," as Peg puts it. After three or four months, changes in the children's behavior and attitude made it clear to Peg and her husband that something was amiss. When she asked, the children shared that they were being neglected and physically abused by their caretakers.

Peg called the children's mother, who very reluctantly reported the situation to the county department of social services. As a result of the report, the children entered foster care in DSS custody. At the mother's request, the children were placed with Peg and her husband. The goal from the outset has been to reunify the children with their mother.

Since the children were placed with her, Peg has been part of a number of child and family team meetings (CFTs). The social workers and facilitators in these meetings were not always the same. This interview reflects Peg's perceptions of the CFT process and her thoughts about its usefulness. It has been edited for content, clarity, and length.

Reflections on CFTs

What were you first told about the CFT process?

That the meetings were to be for the benefit of the children, that the process was safe, and that there was open discussion about the family's progress. Also, I understood there would be a facilitator to manage the meeting, and that the children would have a chance to express their feelings and ideas.

Is that how the meetings worked in practice?

For the most part, no. In most of the meetings, I felt the process was pushed, like it was being done just to check off some box.

I left those meetings feeling confused, angry, and fearful for what might happen to my grandchildren if they were returned to their mother. In the meetings the children—even though they were told they could freely express their feelings—were talked over and their voice was suppressed by the workers.

I've never been involved with social services before and I left meetings feeling confused about what just happened in the room. I couldn't understand the agency's language, talk about court, and the work of the GAL. I just felt depressed sometimes.

However, this wasn't my experience in the last family meeting I attended.

You said the last CFT was better. What made that meeting different?

Oh, the last meeting was good. I and my husband actually felt something was accomplished. I think the biggest difference was that the social worker was open to us all speaking what we had on our hearts. I know this might be off subject, but our social worker now is great, takes time to listen to us, actually comes into our home, sits down, and talks with the children and listens to them.

At this meeting the facilitator actually made us feel comfortable. We could trust that we were going to be heard. We left this last meeting feeling maybe DSS isn't as bad as they seem. After this last meeting I haven't worried about the future because I knew the children were heard. I think the facilitator helped a lot to make this meeting different.

How did the facilitator do that?

The facilitator emphasized that the children could and would be heard. The facilitator created an environment that made us feel we could trust it would happen as they said.

The facilitator kept going to their guidelines, telling us this was to be a safe and respectful place to have the conversation needed. We felt we could be honest and the facilitator was there to be sure no one felt insulted.

What stood out to me was that the facilitator really talked to the children and helped them understand how this meeting was going to go and they could participate as they wanted.

"I think the biggest thing is that in a good CFT meeting, the child is listened to. They actually get the opportunity to express what is on their minds. This was so important to them. They actually talked about it after that last meeting. They want to know they will be heard!"

In your view, what's the biggest benefit of the CFT process?

I like that everyone is together to talk and hear what's happening and what may happen.

The successful meeting I talked about helped change my feelings toward this mother. I had gotten to the place where I just hated her for what she had allowed to happen to these children and still wasn't doing anything to really change. But in this last meeting—through the tears, emotions, and anger—I was able to feel her hurt at having to hear her children say they couldn't trust her and didn't want to come home yet. They loved her, but didn't trust that she had really changed. I could see her hurt.

I think if in every meeting you could allow the true feelings of family to safely come out, maybe a parent could get the point and actually change so they could have their children come back home to them. A well managed meeting can help a parent clearly see what is going on.

Billy Poindexter is a CFT facilitator with Catawba County DSS and a trainer for the Center for Family & Community Engagement at NC State University.

Peg's Tips for Successful CFTs

Foster Parents: Be at the meeting and listen to what the children are saying. Also, if you are not satisfied with how the meeting went and are not understanding, ask for another meeting to get the answers. In the meeting, make the workers take the time to explain so that parents, grandparents, and the children understand. That is so important.

Facilitators: Create an environment of trust in the room. This will help everybody's voice to be heard—especially the children. Take time to explain your guidelines to the children. We adults can read the papers, but the children need to understand. It gives them confidence to speak up. Make sure everyone knows the meeting will be safe and calm. Keep reassuring the group. Help them to know what is said in the room will not have repercussions outside of the room. Just do what you know you should do to make the meeting work for everyone, not just someone.

Social Workers: This isn't about you getting a number off your caseload, it is about the lives of children! If you tell them something is going to happen in the meeting, don't let them down. Do what you said you would do. Listen. Listen to what the children have to say—before you listen to others, listen to them. In the meeting, help the family work through their situations, don't just talk over or shut down what the family needs to say.

Family Members: Realize that the children are tired, fearful, and they don't understand DSS work, the courts, GALs, etc. So many people are coming at you. If we get tired of it, think of how it affects the children! Be sure everyone is heard and that you understand what is happening. Take the time to ask questions, get explanations. Tell the workers if you need someone to help you talk about what just went on.





CFTs through the eyes of a facilitator by Linda Waters

I'm a wife and mother of two children. I have worked in Child Protective Services for eight years and was even in foster care as a child. I'm also a child and family team meeting (CFT) facilitator at McDowell County DSS.

Given my role, you won't be surprised to hear that I really believe in the power of CFTs to make a positive difference in the lives of children and their families. To explain why I feel this way, I'd like to tell you about how I see my role and the impact it can have.

When trying to describe my role as a facilitator in CFTs, several words come to mind: organizer, guide, people watcher, mediator, builder, and safety net. As a facilitator, I take on many roles to meet the needs of the family. These roles empower families and help them make the best possible decisions.

Organizer

As an **organizer**, a CFT facilitator meets with the social worker and gathers information about the purpose of the meeting and any safety concerns as well as supports needed in the meeting. A facilitator also ensures the worker prepares everyone coming to the meeting so they know what's expected and there are no surprises for the family.

Guide

Getting individual family members to participate during the meeting can often be difficult. Coming into a meeting with child protective service workers and other professionals can be intimidating to families. The facilitator tries to encourage families to participate so their voice can be heard.

To begin the meeting the facilitator acts as a **guide** for families by showing them the process of what to expect during the meeting. To set a positive tone, the facilitator begins focusing on the strengths of the family. This allows the families to see the positive attributes in their lives. Family members often become more relaxed and interested at this point.

People Watcher

Facilitators must be **people watchers**, paying close attention to body language, tone of voice, and underlying meanings to what is being said. For example, if an individual is rolling their eyes, clenching a fist, or their face is turning red during the meeting, this can signal frustration or distress. Noticing this, the facilitator can either ask that family member to express their opinion or ask the team to take a short break.

CFTs: Child Involvement Can Make All the Difference

The best meetings I've had involved young children feeling safe enough to express their wishes and needs. For example, I facilitated a number of meetings for a family where their children were in DSS custody (foster care) and placed with relatives. The oldest child was ten years old and had been out of his home for less than a year. This child had been involved in every CFT, but did not like to talk during the meetings.

Before a recent meeting, the worker talked to this child about his wishes. The boy explained to the worker that he did not want to return home because he did not feel safe with his parents. He wanted his parents to know, but didn't want to hurt their feelings. The social worker and relatives were sensitive to his situation and were able to help him feel safe during the meeting.

So that his voice could be heard, the child filled out a form that expressed his wishes. The child agreed the social worker would read this information out loud during the next meeting.

During the meeting this young man sat between his current caregivers, but close to his parents. After the social worker read the child's words aloud, we asked if he had anything to add. The child then looked at his parents and said he did not want to return home because he did not feel safe because his parents would

drink too much alcohol and get into fights.

At the next CFT meeting, a change took place in this young man. He was sitting next to his father. The grandfather was praising the father for continuing to remain sober.

The father looked at the boy and said, "I really didn't drink that much, did I?"

The child looked him right in the eye and said, "Oh yes, you did."

From that moment, the father's demeanor changed. He now acknowledges that alcohol was a problem.

This young man went from being very quiet and not smiling much to being more talkative, smiling, and laughing during meetings. This change took place because he was able to tell others what he wanted for his life. This could not have happened if he did not have the support and encouragement of his caregivers and social worker. All the preparation that was put into encouraging this young man to be able to voice his wishes took a lot of time and commitment from many people.

In the long run it made him happier.

The best CFTs I've had involved children feeling safe enough to express their wishes and needs.

Mediator

Once individuals begin freely talking and voicing their opinions, conflict will often arise. As the neutral person in the room I can **mediate** conflicts between families and agencies. I help people see that compromise can be beneficial. At this point in the meeting family members are hopefully engaged in recommendations being made and willing to think about which services would best suit their needs.

Builder

Choosing services or activities that best fit individual family members can be complicated. For example, several times I have been part of meetings where substance abuse was an issue. On the surface it can look like a person simply has "a drug problem." After discussions about reasons for and history of substance use it is occasionally discovered that an individual is using substances because they have untreated mental health diagnoses or they have a trauma history of their own. Having an individual come forward freely with this information can have a profound effect on how they see their situation. When this happens, professionals and family members come together and I help them **build** a plan that all parties feel will work for the family.

Safety Net

Facilitators are also a **safety net**. Being in out-of-home placement or worrying that children will be removed from their homes can be overwhelming. Because these meetings can be intimidating, every effort must be made to make individuals feel safe, both physically and emotionally.

Conclusion

Facilitating a meeting is a big responsibility that can have an enormous impact on individuals. It takes the commitment of everyone in the meeting to develop a plan that best suits each family. Helping a family develop their own plan is more likely to work for that family than a plan someone else has created for them.

During the meeting it may look like the facilitator only plays a small role, but this can be deceiving. Being an organizer, guide, people watcher, mediator, and all the other things that go into facilitation takes a lot of time and effort, but it's worth it.

Experience has shown me that a well-facilitated CFT can make a big difference to families and children in the long run.

Linda Waters is a CFT facilitator for McDowell County DSS.



SaySo believes in the promise of CFTs by Lauren Zingraff

SaySo is a strong supporter of CFTs. Through activities and events, we help young people in foster care use their voices to advocate for themselves. CFTs are a great way to ensure a young person's voice is heard, respected, and valued.

SaySo has partnered with NC State University's CFFACE (Center for Family & Community Engagement) to create a slideshow on child and family teams. You can access it by going to www.saysoinc.org and selecting "Presentations" from the menu.

This slideshow has been used at many SaySo events, including "CFT—What's In It for Me?" a workshop at SaySo Saturday 2012. The workshop taught young people how to have a meeting where their voice matters and to which they can invite their supporters.

SaySo also collaborated with CFFACE to develop a youth-friendly brochure about CFTs. You can find it at <http://cface.chass.ncsu.edu/youthstudent/index.php>.

All CFTs should be guided by family-centered principles. For the brochure, SaySo youth worked to ensure these principles would be easily understood by young people. They are:

1. Everyone deserves respect. Respect yourself and everyone around you.
2. You have two ears and one mouth. Listen more and talk less. Let everyone's voice be heard.
3. I have many strengths.
4. To judge me is to pretend you've been in my shoes. Don't judge me, and I won't judge you, you feel me?
5. It takes more than one hand to move a mountain so let's work together to make my situation better.
6. Trust takes time.
7. No one knows me better than ME. WE ARE FAMILY, so we probably know more about ourselves than others, huh?
8. It takes a village to raise a child.
9. Honor & Respect my cultural differences. Your culture is important....so make sure the meeting fits who you are.
10. Help my family and make sure I am safe. Your DSS worker's role is to help your family and protect your safety.

Lauren Zingraff is SaySo Program Coordinator at ILR, Inc.

Youth in Care Reflect on Impact of CFTs

Below are reflections from SaySo members on how their life would have been different if they had experienced CFT meetings while in foster care, as well as thoughts from those who have attended CFT meetings.

How would your life have been different if you had a CFT meeting?

I would have known that I had an opinion on my life that someone would listen to. —*Nicole L.*

It would have given me a chance to express what I want and how I feel. Then I wouldn't have to wonder if people understood where I was coming from. —*Kelley T.*

I would have felt more comfortable expressing my wants and also would be more willing to do so. —*Corae H.*

Maybe communication would have been better. I've never had the chance of getting or having one. Maybe the tension in the family would have been better. I can't really say because I've never experienced it. —*Erica F.*



How is your life better because you had a CFT meeting?

With CFT meetings, I was able to advocate for my own goals concerning foster care. In CFT meetings, my social worker, foster mom, biological mom, and others knew I was doing well in my foster home, and I did not have a desire to go home with my dad or mom. CFT meetings give foster youth a way to voice our personal goals and desires concerning foster care in general. —*Roman R.*

I have had a CFT meeting and I am going to continue to do so. It's helping me because my support group is growing and helping me reach my goals. —*Shaquanda G.*

I go to CFT meetings every month. In my CFT meeting, my social worker, therapist, GAL, case worker, house parents, and brother all attend. I like my CFT meetings because they talk to me about my needs. CFT meetings make me feel important and that I matter. I can get my point across. —*David R.*

I believe my life is better from having CFT meetings because it allowed me to hear all new information about my case and to bring some things to the table. Not only did it allow me to voice my opinion but it allowed me to have a clear understanding of information that appeared a little unclear. —*Donisha A.*

Because I had a CTF meeting I knew what was going on in my life and what we were working on. It made me feel like I was not left in the dark, and that my "team" wanted to know how I felt and what I wanted to work on. —*Jackie D.*



Reading Time = Family Time

by Becky Burmester

Unless you're new to *Fostering Perspectives*, you know that I love to read. I read to escape, to learn, and to have fun with my children.

At night I crawl into bed with a book to lose myself in someone else's story. I even find reading "thrillers" and mysteries relaxing.

I read to learn about areas of my adopted children's experiences with which I am unfamiliar (autism spectrum disorder and racial issues).

Because my background is solidly middle class, I read to gain empathy and understanding of persons whose life experiences and expectations are very different from mine (food stamps, Medicaid, substance abuse, losing my child).

But reading is not just a solo activity. I read to my children ages 9 and 11 to share the experience of being read to, even though they are eager readers on their own.

Consider reading as a family every day. It's marvelous when you can find 10-15 minutes to all be together listening to the same story. Even if you are not that into reading, public libraries have some wonderful books on CD and also audio books that can be downloaded to a computer.

Read together as a family—it will enrich your life!

I Wonder

By Jaquaisa, age 14

Sometimes I wonder if we all see the same colors?

Or if someone is color blind and they just don't?

What's beyond our universe?

I wonder if there are other worlds?

Is there a Heaven?

I know there is, but is it really?

I wonder if when we are sleeping,

Are our dreams actual places that we are going?

I think we may be living in someone's dream right now.

I think mirrors lie.

So what are we?





Fight placement disruptions using the “Decker Principle” by Jeanne Preisler

In her essay “God’s Miracles,” Leann tells us about a really tough day she had. On tough

To a child, a placement disruption can feel like a tornado.

days, it is natural to feel overwhelmed and helpless. This is when we might experience a “fight or flight” response. Unfortunately, in child welfare a flight response sometimes means the child or foster parent requests a move. The placement disrupts.

Luckily for Leann, time lessened the need to be moved and her adoption was finalized. She had a happy ending. Her faith was strengthened.

Faith plays an important role in adoption and foster parenting. We take a leap of faith when we trust our agency with all the intimate details of our past to get approved. We take a leap of faith when opening our homes to children in care.

Faith also plays a key role for young people in foster care. It requires faith to believe the “system” will take care of them and not cause them more harm. It takes faith to believe they will be reunified with their birth family or find a forever family. It takes faith to trust the grown-ups to make good decisions on their behalf.

Faith can be especially difficult to sustain when circumstances go against us.

Requesting Moves

A request to be moved by either the foster parent or by the child is understandable. In the child welfare system, it often feels like we do not have any control over what is happening. By requesting a move, we regain control over the situation.

As a foster parent I requested a child be removed once, and although that same child is now my daughter, it was a painful experience for everyone. Unplanned foster care moves are called *disruptions* for a reason. Webster says

that “disrupt” means to “break apart; rupture; to interrupt the normal course.”

Visualize a tornado—that’s what it feels like to the child; bits and pieces of them break apart. It turns their world upside down emotionally, spiritually, and educationally, leaving in its wake rubble that is difficult to sift through and to recover from.

Let’s Adopt the Decker Principle

I am reminded of the woman who successfully protected her children from the devastating tornado that ripped through Indiana in March. Stephanie Decker covered her two children with her body as the tornado crushed her home on top of them. She lost part of both of her legs in the process, but her children were unharmed.

In honor of the courage shown by Stephanie Decker, let’s all adopt the “Decker Principle”—doing whatever it takes to keep our children safe. Let’s do everything we can to protect our children from the devastating effects of child welfare’s tornado: placement disruption.

Before you call your social worker to disrupt a placement, please use every resource available to you to get through the crisis. There are therapists who specialize in working with children and families who have experienced trauma (visit www.nccchildtreatmentprogram.org). Explore respite care options, or seek parent sup-

God’s Miracles

by Leeann, age 11



I would like to share a story about a time when I had a horrible experience but God was in control.

When I was at my mom’s work, I got really angry with her. I was so angry that I called my therapist and told her I wanted to move.

She said she would see what she could do.

After the phone call was over my adopted mom busted out crying. I felt really bad, but I was still mad, so I didn’t want to admit it.

The next day, I told my mom I did not actually want to leave, that I was just really angry.

A few minutes later we got a phone call saying that I could not be taken away because the adoption papers were finalized.

I was so relieved that I did not have to leave.

That is where I got this title, because I knew it was God’s plan.

port groups or mentoring programs. Talk with your child’s social worker or therapist to determine what skills you could build or strategies you could use to help you through the situation.

If we have a tenth of the courage of Stephanie Decker, we could eliminate placement disruptions in North Carolina and create more happy endings like the one Leann experienced.

Jeanne Preisler has been a social worker, kinship parent, foster parent, and adoptive parent.

Post-Adoption Support Providers in North Carolina • July 1, 2011

North Carolina knows families created by adoption are different from families created by birth. Because adoption is a lifelong experience, it is our responsibility to provide you with support to help your family stay healthy and stay together.

The NC Division of Social Services contracts with different agencies to provide post-adoption services in each region of the state. Support can include information and referral services, education and training, support groups, respite care, advocacy services, crisis assistance, case management and service planning, in-home family preservation, counseling, or mentoring. Services may differ by region, but one thing is true across the state: these agencies really want to help you. All of the services are free. Why not take advantage of them?

If you know other adoptive families in your area, please tell them about these free services. If you are a foster parent considering adoption, know that our support does not end after the adoption is finalized. As an adoptive parent, you are making a commitment for a lifetime. We will be here when you need us.

REGION 1

Barium Springs, call 800/320-4157
Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain, Transylvania, EBCI

REGION 2

Children’s Home Society, call 800/778-9955
Avery, Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Yancey

REGION 3

Barium Springs, call 866/667-3398
Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Watauga, Wilkes

REGION 4

Children’s Home Society, call 800/778-9955
Cabarrus, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Stanly, Union

REGION 5

Children’s Home Society
• Davidson, Davie, Forsyth, Rockingham, Stokes, Surry, Yadkin call 800/632-1400, Ext. 353
• Iredell and Rowan call 800/778-9955

REGION 6

Children’s Home Society, call 800/632-1400 Ext. 353
Alamance, Caswell, Chatham, Guilford, Orange, Person, Randolph

REGION 7

Another Choice, call 800/774-3534
Anson, Cumberland, Harnett, Hoke, Lee, Montgomery, Moore, Richmond, Scotland

REGION 8

Center For Child And Family Health, call 855/596-5015
Durham, Edgecombe, Franklin, Granville, Nash, Johnston, Vance, Wake, Warren, Wayne, Wilson

REGION 9

Children’s Home Society, call 910/703-1859
Bladen, Brunswick, Columbus, Duplin, New Hanover, Pender, Robeson, Sampson

REGION 10

Children’s Home Society, call 866/73-4173
Bertie, Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Gates, Halifax, Hertford, Martin, Northampton, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Tyrrell, Washington

REGION 11

Easter Seals UCP, call 252/636-6007
Beaufort, Carteret, Craven, Greene, Hyde, Jones, Lenoir, Onslow, Pamlico, Pitt



NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

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



Greetings from the Association's Newly Elected President

by Wanda Douglas

As your newly elected President, I thought I would take this opportunity to let you know who I am and why I'm here.

I reside in Charlotte, NC and have been married to Tony Douglas for 24 years. We have three teenagers (ages 16, 14, and 13), so there are hormones raging everywhere at our house!

We have been therapeutic foster parents for 12 years and have fostered over 75 youth, from infants to teenagers, with a special emphasis on teens. We are also the proud parents of a three-year-old Giant Schnauzer named Sasha (who is sometimes mistaken for a mini black pony).

The next greatest priority of my life is that I am a homeschool teacher for two of my three children, one of whom requires specialized instruction outside of the home.

I've been a part of NCFAPA since 2005. I have been Treasurer, Secretary, and Vice President of Region 1 for the NCFAPA. I am also seated as Vice President of Region 4 on the National Foster Parent Association Board of Directors. I have been president of two private therapeutic foster parent associations and a State Representative for NACAC (North American Council for Adoptable Children).

I'm also a professional parent trainer. I provide training for the Jordan Institute for Families at UNC-CH, Independent Living Resources, Inc., The Maternal Child & Health

Leadership Program, as well as state and local agencies.

Goals

My goal as President of NCFAPA is to continue to advocate for foster and adoptive parents at the state and national level with continued involvement in family- and child-centered activities. As a representative on the state and national level, I have been invited to sit on policy making committees and have been providing input from the family perspective to the NC Department of Health and Human Services and others.

With the help of the entire NCFAPA Board of Directors and input from you, our members, it is our goal to implement new programs, services, and benefits that will bring added value and grow our membership around the state. Our new website (coming soon!) will provide lots of great information, so please stay connected.

Thanks for a Wonderful Conference

I enjoyed seeing you all at the Association's 14th Annual Conference in Charlotte. Thank you so much for your support and participation. We wanted to honor our parents in a special way this time, so instead of recognizing one foster parent of the year and one adoptive parent of the year, we decided to honor all our foster and adoptive parents with a cer-

Our goal is to implement new programs and benefits that will bring added value and grow our membership.

tificate. It's official: we declare 2012 "The Year Of The Parents." You all deserve to be recognized!

It was also an honor to give special recognition at this year's conference to our former president, Stacey Darbee. I don't know anyone who has worked or fought harder for the Association, our parents, and the children we serve

than this woman (and her family). Stacey, we salute you, we honor you, and we say **Thank You** from the bottom of our hearts for all the years of commitment and loyalty you provided to us all.

I want to thank all our presenters and exhibitors. Without you, we would not have been able to provide a conference for our families. Thanks, too, to Paige Gunter, our training coordinator. She is truly a blessing to this organization; it is due to all of her hard work behind the scenes that things keep moving.

And finally, thank you to the entire Board of Directors. You are the best. It has been a very challenging year for NCFAPA, but you hung in there. As a result we are still here—and growing!

I am excited about the direction we are moving toward and I thank you all for the opportunity to serve you.

God bless you and your families.

Wanda

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 NC is made up of local Family Support Network™ affiliates and the Family Support Network™ University Office providing:

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

800.852.0042, www.fsnn.org

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



SaySo Update

SaySo turns 14

by Nancy Carter, Executive Director, ILR, Inc.

SaySo celebrated its 14th birthday on March 3, 2012 at what we like to call the largest family reunion in North Carolina—SaySo Saturday!

SaySo Saturday 2012

The first Saturday in March is traditionally our annual SaySo membership conference. Guilford Technical Community College has been host to this conference since 2000. This year 215 people registered. Those who came had a full day of laughing, learning, and leadership.

I started the day by reminding attendees why SaySo started and how, year by year, young people in foster care are reclaiming their voice. They have become more vocal in their CFTs, transition planning meetings, court hearings, and school meetings. Youths are speaking to policy makers about how life in foster care is different and how it can be improved.

I also challenged SaySo members to use their talents and strengths to further the mission of SaySo and create a “System of Change.” There are many ways members can get involved, including running for the board of directors, participating in Page week, joining the “Raise the Age” campaign, becoming a SaySo Regional Assistant, joining or starting a local chapter, and speaking to local policy makers about how to improve the lives of young people in foster care.

Joanne Scaturro then presented a humorous session on “Advocacy and Laughter.” She had the room learning through laughter about ways to keep the youth voice a continuous force to improve foster care. Lauren Zingraff, SaySo Program Coordinator, and the current youth Board of Directors then facilitated the rest of the conference, which included a range of workshops led or co-led by youth, elections, large group games, and a celebration luncheon.

Throughout attendees were urged to visit the new SaySo website (www.saysoinc.org), register online for conferences, and get current LINKS information. Three new chapters (in Gaston, Iredell, and Randolph counties) were also inducted; we now have 24 local chapters across North Carolina. Lunch was sponsored by the Fenwick Foundation.

New SaySo Board

SaySo Saturday ended with the election of a youth Board of Directors for 2012-13. The following 20 directors were elected:

- REGION 1: Kelley T., David R., Lora E., and Charles H.
- REGION 2: Shaquanda G., Christopher W., and Sarah F.
- REGION 3: Corae H., Ladjah H., Tressina J.
- REGION 4: Damonique L., Mahdi K., Erica F., Marcella M.
- REGION 5: Shanita G., Megan H., and Shatequa W.
- REGION 6: Princess H., Marie S., Kristen B.

Upcoming SaySo Events

SaySo Survivor VII. May 4-6, Efland. This leadership retreat features guest speaker Tony Brazil and activities such as campfires, canoeing, horseback riding, and s’mores.

SaySo Page Week. June 25-29, Raleigh. This is a chance for high school SaySo members to work side-by-side with NC Senators and Representatives.

It’s My Transition. This one-day seminar for youth age 16+ is held in July, November, and April in various locations in North Carolina.

LINK-UP Conferences. One-day conferences for youth ages 13-16 held in August and January. They offer activities related to communication, empowerment, diversity, and life skills.

For more information, visit www.saysoinc.org.

The 2012-13 board will attend a three-day leadership training retreat in June which will include a ropes course. A commissioning ceremony will conclude the retreat as board members accept their one-year term to serve and represent all foster youths in North Carolina. During the year, Board members will plan and facilitate a variety of youth conferences such as LINK-Up and “It’s My Transition.” They’ll also participate in a variety of projects in collaboration with SaySo partners and the state LINKS program. Members plan to attend and facilitate a workshop at the National Independent Living Association’s annual “Growing Pains” Conference scheduled for September in Atlanta.



Pictured above: SaySo’s new Board of Directors at SaySo Saturday 2012.

What you can do to strengthen sibling connections

A great deal depends on our ability to maintain and strengthen sibling connections for children in the child welfare system.

Placing Siblings Together Makes a Difference

Usually, the best way to maintain sibling connections in foster care is to place brothers and sisters with the same family. Research indicates that when they are placed together with at least one of their siblings, children experience an enhanced sense of safety (Shlonsky, et al., 2005) and fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Smith, 1998). They may also experience better outcomes. For instance, studies have linked joint placement of siblings to increased placement stability (Hegar, 2005) and to positive permanent outcomes—specifically, greater likelihood of reunification (Webster et al., 2005), adoption, and guardianship (Leathers, 2005).

Separating Siblings Can Have Consequences

For most children, being separated from their siblings means losing one of the most significant relationships they have known. This can have a variety of negative consequences:

- Brothers and sisters separated from each other in foster care can experience trauma, anger, and an extreme sense of loss. Separating siblings may make it difficult for them to begin the healing process, form attachments, and develop a healthy self-image (McNamara, 1990).
- Studies have shown that even babies experience depression when separated from their brothers and sisters. In one study, a 19-month-old girl was better able to cope with separation from her parents than from her siblings. When the children in this family were placed in different foster homes the baby stopped talking, refused to eat, withdrew, and rejected affection. This persisted even after she was reunited with her parents. It was not until her brothers and sisters rejoined the family that the child resumed her former behavior (Meyendorf, cited in Hegar, 1988).
- Sometimes it is only through their siblings that children have been able to gain any positive esteem. When they see good qualities in a brother or sister, they are less likely to see themselves as “a bad kid from a bad family.” Siblings are often able to reveal to each other parts of themselves that they are reluctant to share with anyone else, thus strengthening the bond between them (NRCFCPP, 2004).
- Children separated from their siblings in care may be at greater risk of placement disruption and less likely to exit to adoption or subsidized guardianship (Leathers, 2005).

Keeping Siblings Together

The primary responsibility for keeping siblings together when they enter out-of-home care lies with child welfare professionals and the courts. However, kinship, foster, and adoptive parents (i.e., resource families) can make a big difference by doing the following:

- **Express an interest in sibling groups.** Sometimes siblings are separated for no other reason than that the agency involved cannot find a single family to care for them all (Shlonsky, et al., 2005). Resource families can help by clearly communicating to their agencies their interest in caring for sibling groups.
- **Be open to changes.** Children are more likely to be separated from their siblings if the children enter care at different times (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005; Washington, 2007). Make it clear to your agency that you understand how important it is to keep brothers and sisters together, and that you would consider opening your home to the siblings of children already in your care, should the need arise.

Maintaining Connections

Even when siblings are not in the same placement, resource families can maintain and strengthen sibling connections using the following strategies, most of which come from the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning’s *Sibling Practice Curriculum* (2004):

- Family-to-family visits and joint meals.
- Playgroup meetings during foster parent support groups or training.
- Have the children join the same sports association (e.g., play soccer together).
- Allow children to use the phone, email, Skype, or Instant Messenger to chat briefly on a daily basis.
- If your child’s sibling is being cared for by another resource family in the same community, explore the possibility of babysitting for one another or using the same babysitter, child care, or respite provider. It is the social aspect of spending time together in an unstructured way that is valuable to building and maintaining sibling relationships.
- If you are an adoptive parent, consider allowing ongoing contact with your child’s siblings even after the adoption is finalized.
- Children in foster care may live in homes with other children (foster, adopted, or birth) to whom they are not related, but with whom they develop ties. Ask the children in your home who is important to them and, in collaboration with the child’s custodial agency, help the child maintain connections with these children as well.
- Look for opportunities to bring separated siblings together in settings such as reunion camps specifically geared to helping children connect with their brothers and sisters.



Ways Agencies Can Support Sibling Placements

- Siblings should have the same worker, if possible.
- Place children in homes as geographically near to each other as possible.
- When a family is recruited to foster sibling groups, don’t fill up the home with individual children just because the beds are there. Some programs provide a stipend for families without placements, as an incentive to remain with the agency and keep beds open until a sibling group needs placement.
- Siblings can be placed in stages, so that the foster home is not overwhelmed and each child can integrate into the family.
- Provide extra supports to help the family deal with logistics—transportation, assistance with tasks such as school registration, day care, etc.
- Make supportive services such as training and respite care available and accessible.
- Encourage/start support groups in which resource families can share and learn from one another. Families who have adopted sibling groups have the capacity to act as mentors, support networks, and recruiters.
- Make sure resource families, especially kinship caregivers, are receiving all the financial support to which they are entitled.
- Ask community members and businesses to help support resource families by donating or providing at a lower cost items such as vans, bunk beds, etc.
- If siblings must be placed separately, agencies can maintain the sibling relationship through joint therapy sessions, shared vacations, shared respite care, and by placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district.

Sources: CASCW, 2000; McFadden, 1983; NRCFCPP, 2004;

Foster parent training: “Helping Youth Reach Self-Sufficiency”

Here’s an opportunity for foster parents to learn how to teach a course for foster parents AND help foster teens prepare to live on their own.

Independent Living Resources, based in Durham, is recruiting foster parents interested in spending the weekend of October 12–14, 2012 in Burlington to learn what it takes to be a foster parent trainer on topics related to foster teens.

The course, “Helping Youths Reach Self-Sufficiency,” covers the basics of independent living, including assessing youths, making decisions, and building assets, as well as how to use education, employment, and the community in the process.

Foster parent participants will also learn to organize a two-hour training for other foster parents in their area. Participants will have an opportunity to practice training skills at the seminar. Upon returning home, the foster parent trainers will conduct trainings locally.

The course is sponsored by the NC LINKS program and is offered FREE to foster parents. The LINKS program will pay lodging and meals for foster parents to attend. Prior to registering for the course, attendees must ask their licensing worker to support them in this effort to train foster parents.

The seminar begins at 3 P.M. on Fri., October 12 and ends at 1 P.M. on Sun., October 14, 2012. To register, complete this registration form and return it to ILR, Inc., 411 Andrews Road, Suite 140, Durham, NC 27705 or fax to (919) 384-0338. **Registration Deadline: September 4, 2012.** For more information, contact Nancy Carter (800/820-0001; nancy.carter@ilrinc.com).

“Helping Youth Reach Self-Sufficiency” RESIDENCY TRAINING REGISTRATION FORM

Independent Living Resources, Inc.
411 Andrews Road, Suite 230, Durham, NC 27705
(919) 384-1457 or fax (919) 384-0338

Fill out this form (please print) and mail or fax to above address.

Registration Deadline: September 4, 2012

Registrant Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

Agency: _____

Agency Address (if different than above): _____

Participant Interest:

How do you plan to use the skills learned in this seminar?

Do you have training experience?

When do you anticipate conducting your first foster parent training?

Place and Time: Country Inn & Suites, Burlington, NC.

- Friday, 10/12: 3:00 – 8:00 P.M.
- Saturday, 10/13: 9:00 A.M. – 4:00 P.M.
- Sunday, 10/14: 9:00 A.M. – 1:00 P.M.

NC’s Foster Care Infrastructure

North Carolina has developed a foster care infrastructure that currently includes:

- **100 public child-placing agencies** (county departments of social services). Every child in foster care in North Carolina is in the temporary custody of one of these public agencies, which are responsible for ensuring their safety and well-being. All of these agencies supervise traditional family foster homes; one (Catawba) also supervises therapeutic foster homes.
- **115 private child-placing agencies** licensed by the NC Division of Social Services. These agencies provide a variety of services; most contract with county DSS agencies to supervise traditional family foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, or both.
- **47 residential child care facilities** (group homes) licensed by the NC Division of Social Services. These placements are more often used for adolescents and children with serious mental or physical health difficulties.

Foster Homes

Parents in traditional **family foster homes**

are trained to care for abused and neglected children while their parents work with DSS to resolve their family issues. Parents in **therapeutic foster homes** receive special training to provide care for children with serious emotional and behavioral problems. As of March 30, 2012 North Carolina had 7,100 licensed foster homes. Of these:

- 3,721 were **family foster homes**. Of these, 72% (2,696) were supervised by DSS agencies and 28% (1,025) were supervised by private agencies.
- 3,379 were **therapeutic foster homes**. Of these, more than 99% (3,354) were supervised by private agencies.

Because foster homes are such an essential part of our efforts—foster care could not exist without them—and because they can have such a direct effect upon the well-being of children, we should also have some sense of how the system uses foster homes and how long foster homes remain active.

Use. Gibbs (2005) examined administrative data on use of foster homes in Oregon, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Although she cautions that her findings are not necessarily generalizable to other states, she found that in these states just 20% of foster parents pro-



As of March 30, 2012 there were 7,100 licensed foster homes in North Carolina.

vided 60% to 72% of all foster care days. This is in line with the conclusion reached by Stukes Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004), who found that on a national level 33% of licensed homes have no children placed in their homes at any given time.

Length of Service. In the three states she studied, Gibbs found that between 47% and 62% of foster parents quit fostering within one year of the first placement in their home, and that at least 20% of all foster homes left the system each year.

We do not have data about the length of service for foster homes in North Carolina. However, we do know that a large number of new foster homes are licensed each year. For example, in SFY 2011-12 North Carolina licensed 1,638 new foster homes (NCDSS, 2012). This means that about a quarter of North Carolina’s current foster homes were licensed within the past fiscal year.



A reader asks ...

Can I still get an adoption tax credit?

I will be adopting my foster child in 2012. I have heard about the Adoption Tax Credit, but understand that it ended in 2011. Can you clarify this for me?

Congratulations on your upcoming adoption! A permanent family is the greatest gift for children waiting in foster care, and we wish your new family all the best.

There have been many changes in the Federal Adoption Tax Credit during the past several years, and more changes can be expected as President Obama and the Congress continue to work on the federal budget. We encourage you to consult a tax professional to get the best information regarding your specific circumstances. What follows is an overview of the Adoption Tax Credit as it currently exists.

According to the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), for adoptions finalized in 2011, there is a federal adoption tax credit of up to \$13,360 per child. The 2011 adoption tax credit is refundable, which means taxpayers can typically get the credit refunded regardless of what they owe or paid in taxes for the year. Even people who have no income can qualify for a refundable credit. The credit is paid one time for each adopted child, and should be claimed when taxpayers file taxes for 2011.

For 2012, the tax credit will be \$12,650 per child. Families who adopt children with special needs will be able to claim the full credit regardless of their qualified adoption expenses. Other adopters will have to have qualified adoption expenses.

Unlike previous years, the credit will NOT be refundable, meaning that families can benefit only if they have federal income tax liability. Just as before 2010, families will claim the credit with their 2012 taxes, use what they can that year, and then can carry any remaining credit forward for five additional years until the credit is used up or time runs out.

In 2013, the tax credit for families who adopt children with special needs from foster care will decrease to \$6,000. The 2013 credit will be based on expenses so families would need to have qualified adoption expenses to claim any credit. The credit will not be refundable, so families can benefit only if they have federal income tax liability. The income limits for the credit will also be reduced significantly in 2013, meaning that families with higher incomes will not benefit. For these reasons, families considering adoption may want to complete their adoption in 2012.

If you have more adoption tax credit questions, contact the North American Council on Adoptable Children (651/644-3036; taxcredit@nacac.org) or ask tax professional.

I am a licensed foster parent. I didn't think I wanted to adopt, but now I do and my agency doesn't do adoptions. What are my options?

Some child-placing agencies are not licensed to complete adoptions. Talk to your licensing social worker to see if your agency has a relationship with an agency that does adoptions. Otherwise, you will have to identify an agency on your own. A list of all child-placing adoption agencies in North Carolina can be found at www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/licensing/docs/cpalistadoption.pdf

You will want to select an agency and submit an application. If your current agency is willing to share your foster care licensing file with your new agency, it may speed up the process. Your new agency may require you to attend their training, since they will be the agency to approve you to adopt and provide you with post-placement services.

The state of North Carolina has a contract with five private child-placing adoption agencies. These agencies—Another Choice for Black Children, Barium Springs, Children's Home Society of North Carolina, Lutheran Family Services and Methodist Home for Children—provide services free of charge to families willing to adopt waiting children in foster care.

The NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network is here to help you connect with a new agency. If you have any questions, feel free to contact us at 877-625-4371, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Thank you for your willingness to provide a permanent family for our children!

Response by the NC Division of Social Services. 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.

An overview of the Adoption Tax Credit as it currently exists.

VIEWS ON FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION IN NORTH CAROLINA

fostering perspectives (May 2012)

Sponsors. NC Division of Social Services, the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, SaySo, and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work's Jordan Institute for Families.

Contact Us. *Fostering Perspectives*, c/o John McMahon, Jordan Institute for Families, 1459 Sand Hill Road, No. 6 (DSS), Candler NC 28715. Tel: 828/670-5051; Fax: 828/670-5053; E-mail: jdmcmaho@unc.edu.

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Newsletter Staff. Kathy Dobbs (Editor-in-Chief); 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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Online. www.fosteringperspectives.org

Subscribe Online. To be notified about online issues, e-mail jdmcmaho@unc.edu with "FP subscribe" in the subject line.

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

Can't Adopt but Want to Help?

I am not currently in a position to adopt a child, but I would like to help. Is there anything I can do to help a child find permanency?

Yes! Help us spread the word to people who may be considering adoption that there are children in need of families. You can begin by sharing the Waiting Child section (see next page) of *Fostering Perspectives* with your friends, family, co-workers, church congregation, book club, or anyone who cares about children.

Why not share it with your FaceBook friends as well? And feel free to post the waiting children page in your break room at work, on notice boards at church, or anywhere interested parents might see it. You never know who might see this page and feel a connection with a featured child.

For more information about adoption or foster parenting, call NC Kids at 877-625-4371.



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>



Constantino (age 11)

Fun-loving, kindhearted, and helpful, Constantino enjoys playing outside, going to the beach, and doing arts and crafts. He receives extra help at school so he can meet his full potential. His favorite subjects are math and reading. He aspires to be a police officer when he grows up. The ideal family for Constantino is an outgoing, fun, two-parent family that is active in their community.

His forever family will need to be prepared and able to provide him with the love, patience and stability that he needs.



Drexton (age 12)

Drexton has a great laugh and a super imagination. He enjoys football, basketball, watching TV, cars, and coloring. He loves animals and would like to have a cat. Drexton's favorite subject is math. He is not sure what he wants to be when he grows up, but has an interest in teaching art. The ideal forever family for Drexton will be a two-parent family where one parent that stays at home or a retired single parent. Drexton responds well to maternal, nurturing interactions. He is very eager to have a forever family.

Drexton responds well to maternal, nurturing interactions. He is very eager to have a forever family.



Josh (age 13)

A handsome, fun loving young man, Josh is imaginative and warm-hearted. He likes to please others and often wants to help the vulnerable or disadvantaged. As a proud Boy Scout, Josh's interests and experiences include fishing, camping, swimming, hiking, cooking, telling jokes, and just about anything that meets the definition of "boy." Josh is doing well in school and reads on grade level. His adoptive parents must be skillful, work as a team, and have a strong network of support, including family, community, and therapeutic resources.

His adoptive parents must be skillful, work as a team, and have a strong network of support, including family, community, and therapeutic resources.



Shaikea (age 15)

Shaikea enjoys attending church and is active in the school chorus. Shaikea is capable of doing anything—she is very smart and loves to read. Her long-term goals include attending college and becoming a lawyer. Shaikea needs a patient, committed family that will allow her ample time to accept them as her new family. She is frightened of being let down again and needs a family that will really stick by her side. Shaikea wants a family that will allow her to attend church. She desires a permanent family that lives in North Carolina.

She is frightened of being let down again and needs a family that will really stick by her side. Shaikea wants a family that will allow her to attend church. She desires a permanent family that lives in North Carolina.



Shelby (age 14)

Shelby is a very bright, humorous, and compassionate young lady. She enjoys doing crafts, drawing, and making jewelry. Shelby loves animals, especially dogs, and dreams of becoming a veterinarian. She would love to be on a farm or in a home where she can help with animals. Her favorite place to be is in the woods, exploring nature. Her teachers say she is eager to learn, follows directions, completes assignments, and is respectful. Shelby needs a forever family who will provide her with love, safety, and stability. She would like to be the only child in the home, but she would also do well with siblings close to her own age. Shelby will need a family that is comfortable with her maintaining communication with her maternal grandmother.

Her teachers say she is eager to learn, follows directions, completes assignments, and is respectful. Shelby needs a forever family who will provide her with love, safety, and stability. She would like to be the only child in the home, but she would also do well with siblings close to her own age. Shelby will need a family that is comfortable with her maintaining communication with her maternal grandmother.



Tristin (age 12)

Tristin is full of energy and life! She is loving, intelligent, animated, and quite funny. Tristin enjoys making crafts, playing basketball, and card games. She is a creative child with a lot of potential. Quite gifted in art, Tristin considers becoming an art teacher one day. She also loves animals and may pursue becoming a veterinarian. Tristin needs a strong, patient, flexible family that can give her the nurturing she needs to develop to her fullest potential. A single female or two parent home will be considered for Tristin's forever family.

the nurturing she needs to develop to her fullest potential. A single female or two parent home will be considered for Tristin's forever family.



Isaac (age 13) and Mahogani (age 11)

Isaac is shy, thoughtful, funny, smart, mature, and animated. He enjoys movies, going out to eat, going to the water park, playing video games, reading, and computers. He would like to be a preacher or bus driver when he grows up. Mahogani is outgoing, smart, funny, artistic, tidy, and a perfectionist. She loves to be the center of attention. She enjoys coloring, reading, drawing, and dancing. She is very intelligent and does well in school. She would like to be a teacher when she grows up. Isaac and Mahogani are great kids who would benefit from a two-parent family, preferably with a strong male role model. Both children love going to church and would like a family that is comfortable attending with them.

She would like to be a teacher when she grows up. Isaac and Mahogani are great kids who would benefit from a two-parent family, preferably with a strong male role model. Both children love going to church and would like a family that is comfortable attending with them.

Christopher (age 9) and Nathaniel (age 11)

Chris and Nate are hopeful that a two-parent family or a single dad that will commit to them for the long term. Chris is casual, cooperative, and friendly. His interests are reading, playing with friends, and swimming. Chris enjoys learning, has a positive attitude, and is very talkative. Nate is funny, intelligent and loves to try new things. His favorite interests are drawing, soccer, karate, and skateboarding. He enjoys playing outside with his brother but also thrives with time one-on-one with adults. Both boys love animals and are good with pets. These brothers love one another and have a close connection.



Update

Five children of the twelve featured in the November 2011 issue have been matched with adoptive families. The children at right are still waiting for forever families. To learn about them, go to www.adoptnckids.org.

Brion now has a video to share—look for it on his Adoptuskids website next to his photo, or go to YouTube.com and search "Adopt Brion from Foster Care." This link has many children from our state searching for their adoptive families.



Brion



Ethan



Cecil



Jacob



Derick



Chris & Mercedez

Writing Contest

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

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 question:



What's one thing you would want to say to a judge about you or your family?

DEADLINE: AUGUST 6, 2012

E-mail submissions to jdmcmaho@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.

Seeking Artwork and Other Writing Submissions

Submissions can be on any theme. There is no deadline for non-contest submissions: submit your work at any time. If sent via U.S. Mail, artwork should be sent flat (unfolded) on white, unlined paper.

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UNC School of Social Work
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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 licensing social worker. If your answers are satisfactory, you'll receive 30 minutes of training credit. If you have questions about this method of gaining in-service training credit, ask your worker.

In-Service Quiz, FP v16n2

1. Name eight different kinds of people that writing contest respondents say they would invite to a CFT.
2. NC's child welfare policy manual can be found online at <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/manuals.aspx?dc=dss>. What chapter deals with child and family team meetings?
3. Name two things Becky Burmester learned about CFTs from Billy Poindexter's book, "A Place for Voices."
4. List three of the benefits of CFTs described by Joan Pennell in this issue.
5. Where can you find a youth-friendly brochure about CFTs?
6. Linda Waters tells the story of a young man who was reluctant to speak at CFTs. What happened when this child finally opened up?
7. How would you support and prepare a child in your care who was anxious about an upcoming CFT?
8. What are the goals of the newly elected president of the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association?
9. What is "It's My Transition" and how can you learn more about it?
10. Name four things foster parents can do to help maintain connections between siblings who do not live in the same home.

The North Carolina Child Treatment Program

Effective Mental Health Treatment for Children and Families

Established in 2006, the North Carolina Child Treatment Program serves children, adolescents, and families

coping with serious psychological trauma or loss. Its faculty has trained a network of community-based mental health clinicians to provide effective, evidence-based treatments.



One such treatment, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), is designed to:

- Reduce negative emotions and behaviors especially those related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and sexual reactivity
- Correct unhelpful thoughts that make healing difficult
- Provide caregivers with the support and skills they need to help their children move past the trauma and loss.

For more information, go to www.ncchildtreatmentprogram.org or call 919-419-3474, extension 300.

To find a therapist in your area, go to www.ncchildtreatmentprogram.org