

fostering perspectives

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Foster care as a support to families, not a substitute for parents

The theme of this issue of *Fostering Perspectives* is "foster care as a support for families, not a substitute for parents." Foster care is intended to be a short-term intervention that strengthens parents' protective capacities so they can safely care for their children. The goal is almost always for children and youth to return to their families.

One of the best tools we have for making this vision of foster care a reality is shared parenting, a practice in which resource parents cultivate positive, supportive relationships with birth parents.

True, shared parenting isn't always easy. Parents naturally feel hurt and angry when their children are placed in foster care. Building rapport and trust with someone in this

position can take time and require patience and persistence. But it's worth it.

When resource and birth parents build relationships, birth parents have more opportunities to strengthen their ability to care safely for their children. The trauma of separation is reduced. Chances of reunification increase.

This issue of *Fostering Perspectives* is focused on providing resources and tools to help resource parents support families. In it you will find practical shared parenting tips and advice from foster and adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, birth parents, and other experts who know from experience that children and youth in foster care win when the adults in their lives work together for their benefit.



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Resource parents can support families and maintain connections — even during a pandemic

This spring, most of us have been thrown for a loop by COVID-19 and the steps our society is taking to reduce its impact. Here in North Carolina, public schools across the state are closed for in-person instruction at least until May 15. We have been asked to stay at home and to keep our distance from one another to slow the spread of this disease. Daily life has changed for everyone.

Like others, North Carolina's foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers are experiencing disruptions and anxiety. Yet many are also concerned about the impact this crisis is having on the children and families they work with.

Even under ordinary conditions, it can be challenging to support families and children involved with child welfare. When everyone is on edge and very necessary "social distancing" measures cause court hearings to

be postponed or prevent face-to-face family visits, the challenges only increase.

Following are some suggestions of ways resource families can support children and their parents during these uncertain times.

Send a message of hope. The pandemic may be impacting families' cases, visits, and emotional well-being. Acknowledge this, but encourage them not to lose hope. In your own words and your own way, consistently send the message "You will be able to reunite your family. Please know that I will continue to do everything I can to support you and help you get through this."

Stay informed to stay healthy. You'll be in the best position to continue supporting families if you stay healthy and protect the health of others. To do this, stay informed and follow the latest guidance about Coronavirus from credible sources. We recommend

STAY UP-TO-DATE WITH NCDHHS

- **NC's Response to COVID-19.** Provides current, reliable information. <https://bit.ly/3bGjUcD>
- **COVID-19: Individuals and Families.** Offers tips for household preparedness and what to do if you feel sick. <https://bit.ly/2WX7QQd>

starting with those found in the box above and on [FosteringNC.org](https://fosteringnc.org)'s COVID-19 page (<https://fosteringnc.org/covid-19/>).

While staying informed is important, so is moderation. Please "minimize exposure to media outlets or social media that might promote fear or panic. Be particularly aware of (and limit) how much media coverage or social media time your children are exposed to about the outbreak" (NCTSN, 2020).

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Supporting families

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Reassure and educate children and youth.

You can support young people in your care by providing them with factual, age-appropriate information. “Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety” (NASP, 2020).

Please visit <https://bit.ly/2R3ePDt> for a concise and helpful guide from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network that explains how this outbreak might affect your family—both physically and emotionally—and what you can do to help your family cope.

Support and encourage family time.

Across the country, many in-person visits between parents and their children are being cancelled because of the pandemic. Although circumstances in some cases mean visits must be temporarily halted, the U.S. Children’s Bureau issued a letter on March 27, 2020 discouraging foster care agencies from cancelling all visits and reminding them that “family time is important for child and parent well-being [and] . . . especially important during times of crisis.”

If face-to-face visits are on hold for the families and children you work with, there are still a host of strategies that can be used to sustain the parent-child bond. See the sidebar at right for some examples to share with parents. Encourage parents and children to use more than one of these strategies.

Video chats may be of particular interest. There are quite a few free apps available (see <https://bit.ly/3bfmrLe> for a list) that parents and children can use to visit and stay in touch. Many of these platforms make it easy to set up three-way chats. This makes it easy to bring siblings placed in different foster homes together with their parents, and (if necessary) for visits to be supervised.

For a handout with tips on making video chats interactive and engaging—even for young children—go to <https://bit.ly/2RI57wr>.

Model self-care. A valuable way to support children, parents, and everyone else in your life by practicing and modeling self-care. Pandemics are stressful. Successfully managing your worries can help those around you manage theirs. “Taking Care of Yourself in Isolation,” (<https://bit.ly/2QZua7Z>) by University of Minnesota Extension has great ideas for doing this.

Finally, if you are in isolation and need ideas for keeping the kids happy and occupied, you can find some great suggestions here: <https://bit.ly/2R3hMnx>.

Things to Do When You Cannot Be with Your Child

Ways to supplement face-to-face visits or when those are not possible

by Rose Marie Wentz

1. Make a top 10 list of what you like about your child. Send it to them; may be one each day.
1. Send pictures of yourself doing different activities, in different places, making funny faces, etc. Make a video or audiotape of you reading bedtime stories. Send it to your child along with the book.
2. Send a letter each day by mail or email. Start a letter and take it with you throughout the day (or think about what to put in the letter throughout the day). Add a sentence every now and then and be sure to add where you are when you write the different sentences (i.e., at work, cooking, eating).
3. Find unique things to write your letters on, for example, things your child likes—a favorite color of paper, stickers, or pictures of things they like; fun objects—napkins, pictures of you.
4. If you both have internet, go on a virtual field trip with your child. Use a chat program so you can communicate while looking at the web sites. Places to start would be NASA (<http://www.nasa.gov>) or PBS (<http://www.pbs.org>). More trips listed by the child’s grade can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2XyAnf0>. Many museums, parks, and zoos offer virtual field trips.
5. Draw pictures of what you do all day. Be sure to include things like what you eat and what you read. Things that you might think are boring, your kids will be very interested in reading about when they cannot see you. Have your child do the same.
6. Go on imaginary outings during your phone calls/online chats. “Imagine we are going to our favorite place to get ice cream...”
7. Play online games together. Ask your child which games they like to play. Many can be played together online. Video chat app programs have games and program that puts hats, faces, and other things on the people on the screen. Young children can love playing these games and stay very engaged with the other people on the screen.
8. For older children, help with homework or home schooling.

Adapted from: The National Long Distance Relationship Building Institute. (2001). *20 long distance activities for dads at a distance*. Retrieved from <http://www.fambooks.com/daads/fathering.html>

Tips for adults video chatting with young children:

1. Practice looking at the camera. It is tempting to keep your eyes on your own picture, or the images on the screen, but you really make eye contact when you look at the camera, which is better for interactive communication.
2. If there is an adult with your child, ask them to help engage the child in activities with you. It is OK to talk to that adult, just make sure all conversation is focused on interacting with the child and not about adult issues.
3. Keep very young children engaged with you by playing peek-a-boo: turn the camera away from you, then back to your face. Sometimes when the camera comes back you can surprise the kids by showing a book, or toy, or something else you want to talk about.
4. Make sure to use the same greeting each time and in the same tone of voice when chatting with infants and toddlers. Infants and toddlers learn to recognize and feel comfortable with a real person on the screen when they hear that same sound each time they see the person. This is important because they often depend more on smell and touch when meeting a person. On video chat they need more visual and sound cues to recognize you.
5. Think of new questions to begin each chat. The questions can be silly.
6. Avoid talking too much about the virus or why you cannot be together right now. Of course, truthfully answer your child’s questions about these difficult topics. Your child may be worried about you and if you will get sick. Reassure your child about your situation. If you are sick, give your child the information they can understand based on their age.
7. Use a lot of gestures and facial expressions. Be close to the camera, but not so close that your video partner can’t see your hands. Don’t be afraid to move—don’t be a talking head.



Video chats may be of particular interest.



Donna Foster

Talking to children and youth about shared parenting

by Donna Foster

One thing children and youth say about being in foster care is that adults talk about their lives and make plans without communicating with them. I have heard many say, "This is my life and I need to know what is going to happen!" I learned this early in my 17 years of fostering and agree completely. Young people have a right to know what the adults in their lives are up to. This includes shared parenting.

Shared Parenting

What is shared parenting? It is the birth parents and foster or kinship parents sharing in the care of the young person. Many adoptive parents also share parenting with foster parents or birth parents.

Shared parenting can encompass a million different activities. It can be talking positively about the birth parents; sending copies of photos, school reports and certificates; asking the parent about their child's likes and dislikes; going together to medical appointments or attending school events. If the relationship becomes a trusting one, visits can be held in the resource or birth parents' home to make the youth (and everyone else) more comfortable.

Shared parenting could start with the foster parent calling the birth parent to say, "Hi!

I am Donna and I wanted you to know your child is staying with me until he can go back home. He misses you and I thought you may be worried. How do you want me to take care of your child?" After you've had this conversation, it is time to talk to the young person in your care.

Talking to the Child or Youth

When explaining shared parenting to young children, you may say something like, "I talked to your mom. She said she wants you to have a night light and to have orange juice every morning. Even if you can't go home right now, I want your mom to help me take care of you. I want you to talk about your mommy with me. We will send her pictures and notes. We will put pictures of her in our house. We will see her on your visits."

For youth, get them more involved in what they would like to happen. For example, you might say, "While you're with us, you may hear the words 'shared parenting.' This means your mom and I will share in taking care of you. I appreciate everything she shares with me about your needs. I respect your mother is your parent and she wants to be involved. She and I will work together until you go home. What is important to you?"

The words you use every day can demonstrate to young people that their parents

are actively involved in their lives and that shared parenting is important to you. You can include their parents by using words and phrases such as:

- Your mom/dad said...
 - Your parents and I talked about...
 - Your mom/dad wants this for you.
 - I will talk with your parents about this.
- I need to ask them what they think you need.

By participating in shared parenting with birth parents, you will meet the emotional needs of the children and youth in your home. If you include the birth parents, the young person will relax and begin to trust you more.

Children and youth will be able to settle into "being a child" if they are not worried about their parents and foster parents/kinship family getting along. The way adults can demonstrate their love for a child or youth in their home is through their actions. Shared parenting is not about making judgements. It's about sharing in the parenting of the young person in a friendly manner. Putting the child's needs first will benefit everyone involved, especially the child!

Donna Foster is the author of "Shelby and Me: Our Journey through Life Books," a national trainer, and a consultant who lives in Marshville, NC.

Supporting young parents in foster care

It can be hard for foster parents and staff to balance ensuring that a baby is well cared for without taking over the parenting role and sidelining the young parent. Here, Martha Edwards, the director of the Ackerman Institute's Center for the Developing Child and Family in New York, explains how foster parents and staff can help young parents gain confidence and build the connection with their child:

After a baby is born, staff and foster parents sometimes look at moms struggling and find it easier to just take over. That's understandable because these adults may be more experienced as parents. But when that happens, mothers can wind up feeling less confident and less connected to their babies.

In our trainings, we encourage staff and foster parents to provide moms just enough help but not more. We also encourage them to think of their jobs as connecting with the mother, not with the baby.

We introduce the concept of "parallel process," which means that staff and foster parents provide the same kind of support to

young mothers that they'd like to see mothers give their babies. Staff and foster parents often say moms should be more responsive to their babies, or try harder to understand their feelings. We ask them: "What are you doing to read that mom's cues and respond to her? What are you doing to learn what that mom is feeling?"

One foster mother told us, "The teen mom in my home is up all night on the phone. Then she has a hard time getting up for her child." We helped her become curious about that, and start a conversation. In the conversation, the mom was able to explain that the middle of the night was a scary time when she used to wait for the person who sexually abused her. Going to sleep was the last thing she wanted to do. That understanding helped the foster mother be a lot more supportive and a lot less judgmental. Once mothers in foster care have support, they're better able to focus on the relationship with their babies.

When staff and foster parents have safety concerns, that's another opportunity to collaborate. We coach them to say very directly

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"We encourage staff and foster parents to provide moms just enough help but not more. We also encourage them to think of their jobs as connecting with the mother, not with the baby."

to the mom: "Here's what I'm worried about. What can we do?"

If they decide they have to make a report, we advocate that they let the mom know exactly what they are going to report, have her sit with them while they make the report, and let the person receiving the report know they have discussed it with the mom. That can help preserve the relationship even through a very difficult process.

Children's Home Society of NC places greater emphasis on shared parenting and reunification

Children's Home Society of NC (CHS) worked in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to develop a leading-edge practice model to build on the strengths of its Foster Care to Permanency program. A CHS and Chapin Hall team, as well as foster parents, birth parents, and youth with foster care experience, partnered to develop this practice model with the goal of improving stability, permanency, and well-being outcomes for the children in our care, and beyond. This work, that has included scanning the field and reviewing best practices, has led CHS to focus on a few specific areas, including shared parenting and reunification.

At CHS, we believe that children do best when they grow up in a family, and that the goal of our program is to create the best opportunity for children to leave foster care and transition to a permanent family, whether it be through reunification, guardianship with relatives or fictive kin, or adoption.

"Our work in developing the practice model and creating an intentional process for what's best for the child in the system we work in has prompted a shift in our role in reunification," said Matt Anderson, CHS Vice President of Programs. "Since we began this process, we have seen a significant increase in the number of our youth reunified with their families of origin. We want to continue to partner with others to lead a shift in practice that supports birth parents in their goal to reunify with their children."

Reunification is the first desired outcome for children and their families involved in the foster care system. When children are removed from their family of origin, they experience a tremendous loss. They are separated from not only their family, but their friends, their school, their community, and their culture. By prioritizing reunification and shared parenting, we can create opportunities for the birth family to remain engaged with their children while they are placed in out-of-home care. Foster parents become partners with birth parents in the everyday care of their children, helping them to remain connected, dignified, and empowered in their role as a parent.

"Families come in all shapes and sizes, and blended families are important. Young people in foster care should have more rather

"We still have a positive and supportive relationship with the birth family. This has been one of the most meaningful experiences in our lives."

*— Brett Crisp,
foster parent*

than fewer people in their lives. Youth shouldn't be forced to choose between foster parents and birth family. They should be helped to learn how to navigate all of the complicated, important, and even unhealthy relationships in their lives," said Jaquia Wilson, alumni of foster care and SaySo Community Engagement Coordinator.

Additionally, the children can see their birth parents and foster parents work in partnership to meet their needs. Foster parents can also play a mentoring role to birth parents as they work to reunify with their children. CHS is fully committed to supporting the successful reunification of children in foster care to their families, and shared parenting is an excellent way to strengthen these efforts.

"It's about finding the best solution for the child and their family, and how we keep them intact with all the meaningful relationships they have, have had, and will have," Anderson added.

Anderson recently hosted a discussion on the Foster Care to Permanency Practice Model. Brett Crisp, who served on the practice model advisory team as the voice of a foster parent, shared, "When the little girl placed in our care was reunified with her birth family, it redefined what our family was going to look like going forward. We had a different outcome than what we went into it expecting. Yet, we were able to see that it was the best outcome for everyone, including our family. We still have a positive and supportive relationship with the birth family. This has been one of the most meaningful experiences in our lives."

CHS is partnering with Guilford County DHHS to develop tools social workers, foster parents, and birth parents can use to establish effective partnerships between foster parents and birth parents. When children first enter foster care, their birth parents will be given a flyer that provides them with details about the foster family who will be caring for their children. The flyer even includes pictures of the foster family and their home. This tool helps to ease the fears and apprehensions birth parents experience when their children are removed from their care. Likewise, the birth parent will share information about their family, their children, and their wishes while their children

are separated from them.

Within seven days of children being placed in a foster home, CHS placement specialists will facilitate a phone call between the birth parents and foster parents. CHS foster parents understand that birth parents are the experts on their children, and this call allows foster parents to gain insight about the child's specific needs. CHS foster parents will also use the phone call as an opportunity to lay the foundation for a positive and supportive partnership.

Additionally, CHS is developing a new training curriculum to provide families being licensed with more extensive education on the benefits of shared parenting and reunification. The training will also include a series of short videos for social workers and foster parents that will help to break down some of the natural challenges to effective shared parenting. These videos will include foster parents and birth parents together talking about successful shared parenting and reunification.

"One of the things I am most excited about is increased shared parenting, with focus on the birth parent and building relationships so that when the child does go home, the child has more of a community and more support, and the family has more support," said Stephanie Robinson, CHS Placement Specialist.

"Shared parenting is such a positive thing. When the child goes home, if the child goes home, the child will definitely be a part of the foster parent's life. And if the child stays with the foster parent, the birth parent will definitely be a part of the child's life. Either way, the child wins," added Robinson.

Crisp closed with "I hope that more foster families can have the same experience we had, so they can broaden their view of what family means. It means not only welcoming the child but welcoming the family. And, we have been welcomed just as much as we have extended a welcoming arm."

CHS is a licensed child-placing agency in North Carolina.



*Matt Anderson &
Jaquia Wilson*



Brett Crisp



Stephanie Robinson

Shared parenting when there's a concern about safety

Almost all foster parents I know want to do shared parenting because they know foster care is supposed to be a support for families, not a substitute for parents. But sometimes they do have concerns.

Some are new to foster parenting and worried about the unknowns. Others have a specific concern or experience—for example, the child's parent had an outburst at a meeting, or they feel uneasy because the parent has a significant mental health disorder.

In my experience, hesitancy about shared parenting is normal and understandable, but it can and should be overcome. Even when there are genuine safety concerns, shared parenting can succeed and bring great benefits to children and their families. With purposeful planning, firm boundaries, and teamwork, birth and foster parents can join together to ensure the child's needs are met.

In-Person Meetings

Shared parenting is meant to be a face-to-face exchange. True, meeting a bio parent for the first time can be intimidating. But if you are feeling anxious, keep in mind they are probably feeling the same way—intimidated by the situation and the prospect of meeting you for the first time. Try to set a tone that puts everyone at ease.

If safety is a concern, it may be best to have

in-person meetings in a public venue where a safety officer is present. Most government buildings today are equipped with cameras and officers who can intervene if needed. Although the professionals in the building will have your back, it is always wise to know ahead of time how you will communicate with them if a problem arises and where the exits are.

Tech Alternatives

If for some reason a face-to-face cannot occur, not all is lost! Meaningful shared parenting can still occur. Technology can help.

For example, you may be able to set up an email or social media account used only to communicate with the child's parents. Doing this allows you to exchange information, updates, and photos to keep children connected to their parents. Using email or social media also creates a level of accountability, since exchanges can be shared with social workers and other parties to ensure the communication remains appropriate and on target. There are even apps (e.g., OurFamilyWizard.com and [Talking Parents](http://TalkingParents.com)) designed to maintain secure and unalterable records of co-parenting communications.

Before you try any of this, however, be sure to get approval from your social worker/agency. Some agencies do not allow communication through social media. Even if yours

does, the agency may need to approve all social media communications.

Parent Notebooks

If you or the child's parents lack consistent access to Wi-Fi, phones, or a computer, try using parent notebooks. You can use these simple pen and paper notebooks to exchange information about daily events in the child's life, photos, etc. and as a tool for organizing upcoming plans and appointments. They can also be useful for daycare and teacher notes so all parties have the educational and behavioral updates at school, too. Parent notebooks are a great way to communicate when you can't meet in person.

Open communication with your social worker and team is vitally important during shared parenting and to your success as a resource parent overall. But please remember, let's keep the adult safety issues amongst the adults and not discuss them in front of children or youth. At the end of the day, shared parenting is a great tool to make sure children and youth get the best care possible and all parties feel informed and safe.

Amy Huntsman is a licensing supervisor and adoptive parent from Asheville, NC. She has been working with children and families for over 20 years and is the proud mother of two girls, ages 6 and 7.



Amy Huntsman

SaySo update

SaySo is excited to be one of the main stakeholders in North Carolina partnering with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. SaySo has a dedicated alumni staff co-chairing the project's design team and at least five other alumni participating in strategic think tank sessions.

On April 29, 2019, North Carolina partners joined the Jim Casey Initiative to identify current priorities for child welfare stakeholders in North Carolina and explore future opportunities for partnership. By the end of this meeting, those present had agreed to collectively develop a vision and strategy by July 1, 2020 for achieving equitable results for older NC youth who have experienced foster care.

To date, SaySo members and other participants have (1) learned about this Jim Casey initiative and its contributions

to equitable results for older youth, (2) identified priorities for North Carolina, and (3) explored opportunities for re-establishing a Jim Casey site lead agency in North Carolina.

Founded in 2001, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works to ensure that young people ages 14 to 26 in the United States who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday have the resources, relationships, and opportunities to achieve well-being and success. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative does this by focusing on four key indicators:

1. Permanence. Young people are connected to caring, supportive adults. This is critical to ending the pipeline of youth exiting foster care without the permanent relationships that can help them navigate adulthood.

2. Stable Housing. Young people have a safe place to live that

they can call their own. Housing stability is a fundamental need and contributes to educational attainment, gainful employment, and feelings of safety and security.

3. Education Success and Economic Security. Young people earn a high school diploma and postsecondary credentials, have access to work opportunities, and can build financial management skills.

4. Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting Support. Young people have the tools and skills needed to make informed decisions about parenthood, while also ensuring that those who are expecting or parenting have the resources, opportunities, and support needed for the well-being of themselves and their children.

To learn more, visit the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (<https://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/>).

SaySo

SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out), is a statewide, North Carolina-based association of youth aged 14 to 24 who are or have been in out-of-home care. This includes all types of substitute care, including foster care, group homes, and mental health placements.

Mission

"To work to improve the substitute care system by educating the community, speaking out about needed changes, and providing support to youth who are or have been in substitute care."



<https://www.saysoinc.org/>
email: sayso@chsnc.org

Shared parenting past the age of 18: Three stories

What does shared parenting look like for older teens in foster care? To answer this question, let's consider the stories of Anna, Cora, and Delilah. Although their names are fictional, the stories below are based on the actual experiences of foster care alumni in North Carolina.

Anna

The months leading up to her 18th birthday were filled with anxiety for Anna. She was in foster care and placed in a group home that was unwilling to keep her past her birthday. She had graduated high school a semester early, was working full-time at a local grocery store to save money, and she was trying to find someplace to live when she turned 18. She had applied to and been accepted by the local community college but had deferred enrollment because she did not know where she would be living. Homelessness was a strong possibility. Parental rights had been terminated years before and Anna did not have, nor did she desire, a relationship with either parent. She did have a relationship with a grandmother, grandfather, and younger sister.

Through a strange turn of events, Anna was introduced to a family with prior experience fostering teens. She moved in the day after she turned 18 as part of the Foster Care 18-21 Program. This program was the answer Anna had been searching for—somewhere to live that could help her transition to adulthood with a cushion of support.

Her resource family committed to the goals of the program:

- helping Anna move towards greater independence,
- meeting her developmental needs,
- advocating for what Anna said she needed,
- helping Anna develop meaningful adult relationships and supports, and
- helping her make her own decisions and learn from her mistakes.

As Anna and her resource family got to know each other, Anna was able to express her desire to remain connected to her younger sister and some family members. It helped that the sisters both had phones and the hour drive between homes was not an insurmountable barrier. Since Anna did not yet have a license, her resource family committed to providing transportation for visits between Anna and family members. Anna felt comfortable introducing her resource parents to her family members but opted not to send them a holiday card featuring her and her "new" resource family sisters. She didn't want to upset her family of origin.

Cora

Cora was 15 when she moved into her foster-to-adopt placement. Parental rights had been relinquished and Cora was adamant that she did not want contact with her family of origin. She was adopted by her foster family when she was 16.

When Cora was 20 and in college with the help of the NC Reach program (<https://www.ncreach.org/>), she searched for and reconnected with her family of origin. She brought her adoptive mother with her the first time she went to visit her birth mother. She introduced her adoptive mother as her foster mother because she did not want to hurt her birth mother.

Delilah

Delilah was 16 when she moved into what became her final foster home. She had already been in a series of placements over the prior 3 years. She didn't want to move to a new town and her fourth high school, but there were no other options. She was being discharged from her group home. She did not want to be adopted because she had a relationship with her family of origin.

Delilah just wanted a safe place to stay until she turned 18. She talked to her mother on the phone almost every day. Because Delilah had her own phone, supervised visits with her family of origin were the responsibility of DSS, and APPLA was the permanent plan, her foster parents did not participate in any shared parenting. Delilah wanted to keep her family of origin and her foster family completely separate.

Delilah moved out of her foster home on her 18th birthday to an apartment with friends but remains a part of the family. Now

22 and expecting her first child, Delilah turned down her former foster parents' offer to invite her family of origin to her baby shower. She still wants to keep her two families separate.



Jennifer Nehlsen

Insights for Resource Families

The experiences of these young women and their resource families makes it clear there is more than one way to do shared parenting for older teens. Prior to turning 18, court orders need to be followed and efforts to achieve the permanent plan need to be documented.

When they age out of foster care, these young adults need the adults they choose to have in their lives serve as role models and supports. If they choose to enter or remain in a placement with a resource family, that family needs to respect their opinions, let them make decisions about connecting with their families of origin, and teach them about healthy boundaries and relationships. As resource families, we need to be there to provide support if those relationships do not turn out as expected or past trauma comes bubbling up to the surface. Resource families need to be willing to put their own needs aside.

Ultimately, resource families for older teens need to be open to what is needed and wanted at that moment because it can, and probably will, change.

Jennifer Nehlsen is the Guardian ad Litem Regional Administrator for NC's 26 western counties. Jennifer leads a staff of 44 who recruit, train, and support 1,200 volunteers to serve as the voice for 3,200 abused and neglected children in this region. To learn more about Guardian ad Litem, visit www.volunteerforgal.org.

NC's Foster Care 18 to 21 Program

This program allows youth to stay in foster care until age 21. Services and benefits include Medicaid coverage and educational grants/scholarships for attending a NC public community college or university. Other program benefits include:

Placement in a home approved by the county child welfare agency. The only ineligible living situations are being incarcerated or living with the person DSS removed the young adult from (*waived in some cases during the COVID-19 pandemic*).

Foster care payments at the standard rate (currently \$634/month). These are for food, shelter, clothing, incidentals, and ordinary and necessary school and transportation expenses. Payments may be made to a foster parent, placement agency, relative, or host family. The county may even make the payments directly to the young adult.

Ongoing case work that includes a plan created

and reviewed at quarterly meetings with the young adult and their team; monthly contact between the young adult and social worker; quarterly home assessments; and assistance with annual credit checks.

LINKS. Program participants can also continue to access services from LINKS.

Youth who turn 18 while in DSS custody must meet one of these criteria to enroll in Foster Care 18 to 21:

- Enrolled in secondary education;
- Enrolled in postsecondary or vocational education;
- Participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
- Employed at least 80 hours per month; or
- Incapable of meeting the above requirements due to a medical condition or a disability.

Once enrolled, young adults must maintain their eligibility. To learn more, refer to NC policy (<https://bit.ly/2RC2giE>) or ask your county child welfare agency.



For kinship families, shared parenting can be complicated

by Glenda Clare

Shared parenting was my goal when I decided to assume the custody of my cousin's youngest child. To be supportive, I accompanied my cousin to Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings and paid for required drug testing. In my head, I was singing Sister Sledge's "We Are Family." I knew everything was going to be alright if we worked together. Foster care placement immediately stopped when I brought my younger cousin home to live with me.

I quickly learned that families are complicated. Family members share a history. A family's dynamics are forever changed when a child goes to live with a relative. Instead of the role of grandma, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, or in my case, cousin, family members assume the role of the parent in the life of their relative's child. Boundaries are crossed, and loyalties are questioned.

Within two weeks of my assuming custody, my older cousin cut off all communication. She refused to answer the phone when her daughter and I called. She would not respond to letters. Other family members accused me of stealing her child. I didn't understand why the good I thought I was doing was going wrong. My intention was for us to work as a family to parent my cousin's child.

A grandfamily peer had a similar experience with her daughter regarding the parenting of her grandson. Although her daughter tried, she was unable to parent her son due to her mental health challenges. After years of frustration, the family decided to plot another course. As a family, they decided to rid themselves of hurt feelings and past disappointments and work together to create better outcomes for everyone in the family.

It must be said that DSS involvement usually results in anxiety for everyone in the family. Everyone—children/youth, birth parents, prospective relative parents (as well as other extended family members), have feelings about the prospect of a family member entering the foster care system. Emotions can include loss, anger, guilt, jealousy, resentment, loyalty, and competition. If it is to be effective, shared parenting in the biological family system requires **work**.

While there are significant benefits to shared grandfamily parenting, it is important to be aware of potential challenges such as:

- Initial feelings of anger or resentment by the birth parent. Anger may be an expression of grief and viewing the relative parent as a threat to the birth parent's personal relationship with the child.
- Children feeling conflicted loyalties to

both their relatives and birth families.

- Potential safety risks for the child or the relative parent, depending on the situation.
 - A change in a child's behavior before or after a visit with the birth parent, as a result of coping with stress or feeling triggered by past trauma.
 - Relative parents disliking what the birth parent did (or let others to do) to the child.
- Sometimes, there is a need for outside assistance. Family mediation services from an unbiased provider may offer an opportunity for all involved to have a frank discussion about the issues at hand. Although it may feel embarrassing, there is a need for the family to understand the reason for child welfare involvement. Working together, the family can create an effective process (e.g., family group decision making) to resolve issues of concern in a way that promotes the well-being of everyone.

Glenda Clare is NC representative to the Generations United National GRAND Voices Network, a Family Partner Specialist at the Center for Family and Community Engagement at NC State Univ., and a former kinship caregiver.

A family's dynamics are forever changed when a child goes to live with a relative.

Parenting Resource

Simple Activities for Children and Adolescents

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has developed a useful handout that offers activity ideas to parents whose families are sheltering in place, social distancing, and homeschooling due to school closures amidst the COVID-19 outbreak. This fact sheet outlines activities families can do without supplies, in lighted or dark areas, to stay preoccupied when dealing with the stress of a major event. Ideas found on "Simple Activities for Children and Adolescents" include:

- Write letters to friends or family. Create homemade cards to send to friends and family to stay connected.
- Play "Sound Search." Everyone sits still and identifies as many different sounds as possible.
- Play "Follow the Leader." Players line up and walk behind the leader, copying whatever the leader does.
- Read to your pet. This is great for young readers as well as children with reading challenges.
- Tell exaggerated "Stories" of the "old days" to entertain.

To access this complete handout, please visit <https://bit.ly/2R3hMnx>.



Have You Heard about NC Reach?

The NC Reach program provides college funding and support services to young people adopted from North Carolina DSS foster care after the age of 12, exited from foster care to a permanent home through the Guardianship Assistance Program, and those who age out of the system at 18. Benefits include:

- **Funding.** Provides last dollar funding after all federal, state, and private dollars have been applied, to ensure that students can meet the cost of attendance at community colleges or four-year public schools.
- **Mentoring.** Be matched with a volunteer online mentor based on your professional, academic, and personal interests and goals.
- **Workshops.** You must attend at least one workshop every semester. Topics relate to school, work, and home life.
- **Academic Support.** Participants are coached by NC Reach staff; if they fall below a 2.0 GPA they are enrolled in a program for intensive academic support.
- **Internships.** NC Reach coaches students on finding and successfully applying for internships in their communities and across North Carolina.

Eligibility Requirements

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

For further information or to enroll, visit www.ncreach.org.





Writing Contest

Creating a feeling of safety

We asked young people in foster care, "We all have times when, even though we are physically safe, we don't feel safe. When this happens to you, what are some of the things that help you create a feeling of safety?" Here's what they had to say.

Ethan, age 13

Things that help me feel safe are reading, praying, and playing with toys. I read to help clear my mind from negative thoughts. Every night I pray so that I don't have bad dreams because they scare me. When I feel anxious, I build with my Legos. When I don't feel safe, I like to be around people so that I am not alone. Also, I like to talk to my older brother when I am upset. I worry a lot about my baby brother getting hurt. I try to make sure that he stays safe by checking on him. If I'm thinking that something bad could happen, I remind myself that it probably won't happen. I go to my mom and dad for comfort and they tell me that everything is going to be OK.

ETHAN RECEIVED \$100 FOR TAKING TOP PRIZE IN THE WRITING CONTEST.

I worry a lot about my baby brother getting hurt. I try to make sure that he stays safe by checking on him.

1

Makayla, age 13

In the past, there were times when I was not safe. Right now, I know that I am safe but when I don't feel that I am, some things I do are draw and write little poems about my feelings.

The thing that helps me the most is listening to music. Music relaxes me and makes me feel calm when I feel like things are out of control. The right song at the right moment can really bring you in. Sometimes I feel like everything is falling apart but then when I find the right song I get pulled back in and it calms me. Music is definitely something that I cannot live without.

My favorite genre is country. I have always listened to country. My biological dad always listened to country and when I listen to it, I think of all the good times I had with him.

MAKAYLA RECEIVED \$50 FOR TAKING SECOND PRIZE IN THE WRITING CONTEST.

Sometimes I feel like everything is falling apart but then when I find the right song I get pulled back in and it calms me. Music is definitely something that I cannot live without.

2

Demi, age 12

When I am scared, I always go to God first because God will always be with me. I ask Him to comfort me and to comfort all of the people who need it. People can go through really hard times just like me. So sometimes when I'm thinking about what the people in my life have done to me, I get scared that they're going to come hurt me. When I'm worried about that, I talk to my foster parents, and they are really good about comforting me. (You can go to them about anything and not just your past.) If you have a notebook or anything you can write in, you can write down why you're scared. That always helps me! When you are done you can save it for you and your therapist to talk about if you want. I just want to let you know, you DO NOT have to do any of these things, but they really help me!

DEMI RECEIVED \$25 FOR TAKING THIRD PRIZE IN THE WRITING CONTEST.

When I'm worried I talk to my foster parents. They are really good about comforting me.

3

What Helps Me Feel Safe

A lot of things help me feel safe. I always feel safe when my mommy and daddy are with me because they protect me. Reading helps me forget when I am alone in my room. I like snuggling with my blanket to help me calm down and use it to wipe my tears. I remember that God is always with me and sometimes I pray.

— Chloe, age 7

I like snuggling with my blanket to help me calm down and use it to wipe my tears.

At night I get real scared. Tap, tap, tap. Creak, creak, creak. BANG, BANG, BANG. These are the noises that go on inside my head.

My heart pounds. I start to sweat. I feel a little cry inside. Then I pull the blankets over my head and I calm down and I pray to God. I say, "Dear God, thank you for this day and everything you've given us. Please, Lord, be with all the prayer requests and the homeless. But please, Lord, keep our friends, family, us, and all the animals safe Lord, please." That is what I do when I am scared in my bed.

— Hayley, age 11

My heart pounds. I start to sweat. I feel a little cry inside.

When I came to my new home at 9 years old I was scared because I did not know my foster parents. I was scared to call them mom and dad because I was scared that my old parents were going to be mad at me. But my new mom and dad told me that I was going to be adopted. And then some of the bad thoughts of them trying to find me or them trying to get me went away, and when I slept I had better thoughts.

Now I feel so safe at my new home that I can go anywhere and I don't have to worry about them trying to find me. When I don't feel safe I tell my parents and they help me. Now I'm 12 and I think about all the good things that my new parents have done for me. I love my new home and parents!

— Dalton, age 12

Now I feel so safe I can go anywhere.

THESE AUTHORS RECEIVED \$20 FOR HAVING THEIR ESSAYS PUBLISHED.

Foster care alumni offer shared parenting advice

What does shared parenting look and feel like to a child or youth in foster care? To find out, we asked members of SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out) what the experience was like for them, what they learned, and whether they had suggestions for adults and others involved in shared parenting.

As the essays below make it clear, youth know shared parenting can be hard, but they also know that if the adults involved build trust and focus on the best interests of young people, they can achieve great things. We would all do well to take Symanthia's advice to "look at the bigger picture and stay positive"!



Lanitta Berry

Shared Parenting While Raising My Daughter When I Was in Foster Care

Growing up in a two-parent home, I would have never guessed that I would end up in foster care, let alone becoming a single mother at the age of 13. From playing with Barbie dolls to now shaking rattles at my own baby, it was never the plan that I had imagined for myself. I was used to abuse. I did not want to raise my daughter in an environment that I was raised in. I have been blessed to have people there with me every step of the way to help me nurture my daughter, V., including my foster family, her father's family, and the department of social services in Mecklenburg County.

Co-parenting is never an easy task and can often times be where personalities can clash. During my time in foster care, there was always a "trial and error" approach of parenting my daughter. This meant that V. had multiple caretakers all with different parenting styles. It could be difficult at times to keep everyone on the same page. The most important fundamental value that holds all co-parenting relationships together is **trust**. Being in foster care I had to learn

how to trust my foster mom and the department of social services to make parenting decisions for my child, while also trying to assert myself as her mother. Being able to trust the other caregivers involved helped to develop an atmosphere that was positive and productive for V. to grow in. I learned that it is not always easy to build trust, but V. had a good team who cared for her. Since I was a young mother, I would go to the park and buy clothes at the store for V. Doing small activities like this with my daughter helped build trust between me and the other caregivers. Eventually everyone was all on the same page with my parenting skills and had confidence in my ability to be a good mother.

Another fundamental value of shared parenting is **patience**. I learned that being patient requires self-control and trust that can help us interact with one another. Dealing with other caregivers was challenging at times because we all communicated differently. Learning patience helped me to understand why people were communicating with me in a certain manner. In learning to communicate with the other caregivers involved, I understood that

I could control only my actions and how I react towards others. Being patient helped me process what everyone around me was saying so that I could make the best decision for my daughter. Even if my decision was overruled, I at least learned how to advocate for my daughter.

Doing shared parenting while you are in foster care can be difficult, but it is not impossible. No matter the personality type or the values a person has, shared parenting has to be a team effort. Having trust and patience were the keys to success for my daughter and me. I know how hard it can be to parent in foster care, but if you learn to trust those around you and have patience in the process, co-parenting could potentially turn into a positive experience.



Trust is the value that holds all co-parenting relationships together.



Symanthia

Learn from My Experience by Symanthia

I have no recollection of any cordial conversations and visits [between my mom and foster parents]. My mom always had an unpleasant and disgusted stare as her expression while my assigned social worker came across as rude and petty. My siblings and I continuously walked on eggshells within our visits and our foster parents' homes. We always feared to upset the adults with our concerns and worries of not returning home. . . .

Depression, anger, and defeat began to make its way into my life. The nasty comments by my foster parents about my mom became a reality to me. I started to believe their words about my mom, siblings, and myself. I started to isolate myself. . . .

My advice to foster parents and kin caregivers, social workers, and also birth parents is to keep an unbiased view around

the youth. Everything said or done negatively to make the other party look like a villain can make you seem uncaring. The focus should stay on the best interests for the children. If you feel something is not being done right, at least try to have a conversation. Youth seeing adults conversing over their differences and not acting in a child-like manner helps.

My advice to youth is to look at the bigger picture and stay positive. Sometimes as young people, we are stuck in the present and how we feel at a particular moment. We do not realize that flowers need water to grow. It's okay to hurt and be angry and it is okay to feel happy, too. Seek help and answers for your problems and concerns with your life. Focus on your well-being and your future.

My siblings and I walked on eggshells during visits.

My Advice for Foster Parents & Social Workers

The transition to shared parenting can be quite difficult. Trust is one of the primary challenges, because biological parents can show patterns of inconsistency. This can cause negative effects in parent-child relationships: it can cause sadness, feelings of neglect, and resentment. But biological parents can become very consistent with their effort to be a part of their child's lives. This can be done through visits, phone calls, letters, and many other things. . . . My experiences with shared parenting helped grow and foster connections with my biological family.



Mariah Thompson-Grissett

Advice for Foster Parents

Have strong and efficient communication skills. These skills ensure all parties involved are on the same page. Foster parents should also give their children adequate space to grow and become individuals.

Advice for Social Workers

Be sure to explain to the child what shared parenting is and how it will work.

Building a positive relationship with birth parents by Donna Foster

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

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

Stage: Shock

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

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

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

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

Be ready for serious anger. Do not let angry words stop your compassion. The birth parents have lost control over their child. They are at a loss as to how to fight for themselves. Demonstrating that you understand this frustration is a first step in the development of trust between the adults.

Stage: Protest

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

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

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

Understand the birth parent's anger as an expression of grief. Do not show your own anger. Instead, show compassion. This can be difficult if the children have been neglected or abused. Your feelings are your own and should not be overlooked. But as

foster parents, you must remember the child loves his or her parents. The plan is almost always reunification. Use your own feelings to motivate and support the birth parents as they learn how to parent their children in healthy ways.

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

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

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

Stage: Adjustment

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

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

Ask birth parents about their children. Ask questions such as: How do you want us to take care of them? What do your children like to eat? What allergies do they have? Are they allergic to any medications, mold, animals, etc.? What fears do they have? What do you do to calm them? What do they need with them at bedtime, such as special blankets, pillows, stuffed animals? What are their school needs? Are they close to any teachers, bus drivers, or other family members? Who are they? What do you want the children to call us?

continued next page

Birth Parents' Grief Process

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

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

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

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





Parents are NOT broken

by Corey B. Best, consultant and professional guide, Birth Parent National Network

I view myself as worthy, resilient, and filled with hope. However, I never quite understood why systems that were designed to support, nurture, and live by such a high standard viewed me as broken and in fact treated me and others around me as such.

This daunting and harsh lesson about systems, specifically our child welfare/protection system, required a deeper look at our collective, institutional history to gain insight into our perpetual cycle of why we feel we must “save and rescue” parents and children. Eventually, I began to seek truer answers to a few baffling questions:

- Where did I get the idea that I wasn't good enough?
- Who conditioned me to believe that my race is a danger?
- Why was I so attached to conflating needing help with being broken?

In my quest for greater self-discovery, I quickly realized that the reality I inherited and was indoctrinated into was a paternalistic system of ideologies that often are allowed to subjugate, dehumanize, judge, and deem parents unworthy of the basic dignities of life—to be seen, heard, and valued as being equals, good enough, hopeful, and resilient. These age-old legacies shape the way we practice, provide services, assess safety, and establish relationships with parents.

Along the journey, I've witnessed and experienced many oppressive and suffocating experiences. But none of those have broken me. In fact, some parents experience far worse when they need help that is not avail-

able, face criteria that are too stringent, or have been given the bandaids of several programs rather than one that is focused on root cause, community conditions, or invited Maslow's hierarchy of social needs into their lives. Even when some families feel that our systems are there to provide support and engage them, countless others often find the face behind the glass saying, “we don't offer that here.” And even so, those families' resilience grows!

My core values of justice, social contribution, and family are enriched by the conversations I have with parents across the country about what works to keep families strong, healthy, and thriving. While hosting Community Cafés, focus groups, and healing circles with parents, the common denominator is one brave soul. Parents have indicated that even during the mess, chaos, homelessness, substance use, domestic violence, and loss of employment, it only takes one human being to show up and acknowledge their assets.

We know that child neglect and abuse is preventable, and our child welfare system plays a critical role in developing and co-creating conditions where families are seen for who they are—human beings. However, along the way we must remain focused on the following adaptive challenges (i.e., challenges without a clearly defined solution and that require input from the collective community):

- Allowing parents to be a part of the solution
- Sharing power with parents
- Normalizing help-seeking behaviors
- Deactivating bias-driven practices
- Creating universal access to concrete support for all parents
- Becoming brave enough to dismantle racism

We see parents as treasured leaders—wise and filled with hope

Building a positive relationship with birth parents

continued from previous page

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

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

After Reunification

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

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

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

Reprinted from Fostering Perspectives vol. 13, no. 1 (2008)

- Asking yourself, “Is this good enough for my child?”

The beauty of adaptive strategies is, once identified, they'll help us embrace how interdependent we are and that the work of reimagining a child welfare system that's focused on primary prevention doesn't have a clearly defined path. Yet, in order to support families differently, unnatural partnerships with parents are mandatory. Systems are more inclined to partner with formal professionals, experts, and leaders. Partnering with those most impacted by the delivery systems (i.e., parents, caregivers, families) are unnatural, challenging, and seen as less important.

In closing, prevention begins with authentic relationships in the community and with parents. Our current child welfare system has defined prevention as averting a child from coming into foster care. The Birth Parent National Network seeks to push our country forward by elevating the voices of parents and organizations that are bold enough to scream “parents aren't broken!” We know that for us to strengthen our communities, we must partner with parents. We see parents as treasured leaders—wise and filled with hope. I encourage all to continue mining for gold, not digging for dirt. There's a nugget inside of all of us. If you can't find it, you're not looking hard enough.

The way we see the world is how the world becomes!

To join the Birth Parent National Network, visit <https://bit.ly/39IJZGM>. (Resource parents can join as individual stakeholders.)

Reprinted from Children's Bureau Express, Feb. 2020 (Vol. 21, No. 1) <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>

NC 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
- Provide caregivers with the support and skills they need to help their children move past trauma and loss.

To learn more, go to the link below or call 919-419-3474, extension 300.

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



Shared parenting in the context of adoption: One family's story

by Jonathan Rockoff

Shared parenting was their biggest fear about being foster and adoptive parents. But they overcame this fear in an inspiring and remarkable fashion.

I met Jonathan and Sally Six of Wake Forest, NC five years ago when they first became licensed foster parents. They already had one child of their own, "Mark," and wanted to open their home to children in need. I remember being truly impressed with their dedication and willingness to foster children of just about any age.

Initial Hesitation

Of course, like any new foster parents, they did have some concerns. Jonathan in particular had a lot of apprehension about shared parenting. Because his top priority was providing a safe and loving home, he wondered: if a child had been unsafe with their birth parent once, how could we be one hundred percent sure this wouldn't be a problem again in the future?

I applauded Jonathan for being open about his concerns. Through pre-service training, open conversations, discussions

with seasoned foster parents, and his faith Jonathan gradually realized the greatest outcome of foster care was to reunite families. His mindset truly changed.

"Kevin"

When he and Sally received a call about a newborn named "Kevin" they did not hesitate to say yes. They were told shared parenting would be an expectation and were ready to do what it took to reunite a family.

The first time they met Kevin's mother, "Michelle," Jonathan and Sally knew their goals were to love Kevin as much as they could, support his mother, and assist in reunification. Jonathan remembers after one face-to-face meeting with Michelle he knew how much she loved Kevin and it humanized her in a way that no amount of training or conversations about shared parenting ever could.

Incarceration

Unfortunately, her struggles with substance use continued. Shortly after placement, Kevin's birth mother was arrested and in jail.

However, this did not stop Jonathan and Sally from shared parenting. They would regularly

make the 30-minute drive to see her and provide in-person updates and pictures.

When she was released to a rehabilitation facility, Jonathan and Sally took Kevin to visit her as much as possible.

"Mary"

Not long after her release, Michelle found out she was pregnant again. When her daughter, "Mary," was born, Michelle wanted her placed with Jonathan and Sally. They had built a relationship of trust. Michelle knew her children would be unconditionally loved in the Six home.

Adoption

Ultimately, Michelle had to make an extremely difficult and selfless decision. With the loss of her parental rights looming, she asked Jonathan and Sally to adopt both of her children. They said yes without hesitation.

"Part of the Family"

It's been almost two years since the adoption. Jonathan and Sally still see Michelle regularly and consider her part of their family. They've also built strong connec-

Even Michelle's incarceration did not stop Jonathan and Sally from doing shared parenting.

tions with Michelle's father and Mary's birth father. They all make an effort to come together for holidays and important milestones in the children's lives. They have open lines of commu-

nication and support one another.

Jonathan looks back at his apprehension towards shared parenting through a different lens now. To him, shared parenting is all about seeing people as individuals no different than he is. It is about building trust and making yourself vulnerable, always with the best interest of the children in mind.

Recently, Jonathan and Sally welcomed their second birth child, "Anna." Fittingly, the Six family now has six members. But they think of themselves as having many more. That number includes their extended family, and the family of Kevin and Mary.

Jonathan Rockoff is a Training Specialist with the Family and Children's Resource Program at the UNC School of Social Work

A Birth Mother's Perspective

Working together to help Darren return home

I visited Darren a lot while he was in foster care and worked hard to get him back. Even though I had two relapses, I went to school full-time and worked part-time. I lived in a shelter some of the time, and I got TANF....

After our visits, I always took Darren back to the agency where his foster mother would pick him up. For about a year, I never saw her. One day the agency worker had to leave before the foster mother arrived, so she asked if I would stay with Darren until his foster mother came. When we met, we were both very stiff, sizing each other up, and didn't think we would like each other. But we were cordial. Shortly after this, Darren's foster mother, Sally, called to tell me that Darren was going to be in a pageant at her church, and she invited me to come. Sally began to invite me to go on other outings with her and Darren. Gradually, we got used to each other, liked each other, and started working together to help Darren return home.

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

Kate (Darren's Mom) and Sally (His Foster Mom) Talk about their Success

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

Darren has been home for 5 years. He is now 10 years old, and Sally is still a part of our lives. . . .

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

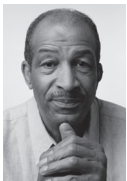
Kate: When Darren lived with Sally, we tried to have the same rules for him so he wouldn't be confused. When he came to visit me, I tried to keep the same routine and rules that Sally had established. The three of us went to counseling together. This helped ease the transition for Darren....

Sally: This story is about Darren, not about us. As Kate said, Darren is the one who has benefited the most from our working together. He has not had to leave behind any of the people that he has grown up with. He has a larger extended family than he would have had. . . .

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

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

"This story is about Darren, not about us."



A reader asks ...

Is birth family contact after adoption wise?

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

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

It is common, particularly for older children, to want to maintain relationships with one of more of their siblings (who may be adults or adopted separately) or with grandparents or a favorite aunt or uncle. Relatives may provide emotional support, even if they are unable to provide daily care for the child.

Supportive relationships can look different for each child and family. A yearly birthday card with photos, monthly visits at a park, phone calls, and social media are examples of ways to remain connected. For children in foster care, a more typical arrangement would consist of in-person visits with a grandparent, or for teenagers, phone calls, Facebook contact, or e-mails with a sibling. Since each situation is unique, continuation of significant relationships for children who have been in foster care should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual child and family.

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

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

Each adoption is unique and how the child views their adoption changes as they mature. When considering adoption, carefully explore how comfortable you and your family would be supporting lifelong relationships for the child. Child welfare workers and local mental health clinicians may be helpful in determining what level of contact will work best for the child and your family.

I know sibling connections are especially important for children in foster care. When siblings can't be placed together, what are some things I can do to make sure my child's sibling connection is not lost?

Siblings in foster care should be placed in the same home whenever possible. Being separated is usually a significant trauma and can deeply impact their emotional well-being. Unfortunately, there are times when siblings must be separated. Here are some ways foster parents can help children in foster care maintain these important sibling relationships:

- Frequent and consistent visits
- Joint outings and experiences
- Celebrate birthdays and holidays together
- Create new family traditions incorporating siblings
- Help children cope with their complicated emotions
- Arrange other forms of contact (e.g., through FaceTime or Skype)
- Involve the children in the contact planning
- Overnight visits/joint respite care

Response by the NC Division of Social Services. Portions of this column were adapted from the Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019 (<https://bit.ly/34gV3K5>). Have a question about foster care or adoption you'd like answered in "A Reader Asks"? Send it to us using the contact information in the box at right.

fostering perspectives (May 2020)

Sponsors. NC Division of Social Services, SaySo, and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the UNC School of Social Work.

Contact Us. *Fostering Perspectives*, c/o John McMahon, Family and Children's Resource Program, UNC School of Social Work, 100 Europa Dr., Suite 571 – CB# 5220, Chapel Hill, NC 27517. Email: jdmcmaho@unc.edu.

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Newsletter Staff. John McMahon (Editor)

Mission. *Fostering Perspectives* exists to promote the professional development of North Carolina's child welfare professionals and foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers 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 School of Social Work.

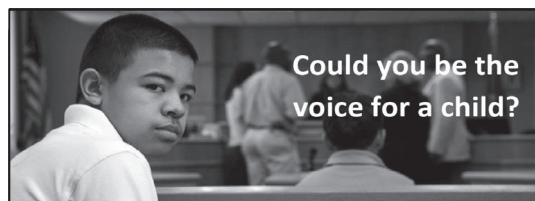
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Did you know that 2,000 children who have been abused and neglected in NC will go to court alone? You can help. Become a Guardian ad Litem.

Stand up today to say, "I am for the child."

More than 2,000 abused and neglected children in NC go to court without someone to advocate just for them.

- Could you speak up for their best interests?
- Could you work side by side with an attorney?

If so, becoming a Guardian ad Litem advocate could be a great opportunity for you! To learn more, find us at any of the links below or call 1-800-982-4041.



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Help us find families for these children and youth

For more information on these children or adoption in general, contact the NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network (tel: 877-625-4371; email: nc.kids@dhhs.nc.gov; web: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/social-services/child-welfare-services/adoption-and-foster-care>)

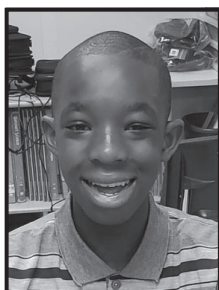


Bradleigh (age 9)

Bradleigh is spunky and full of energy! This adorable little girl would make the perfect addition to the right forever family. Bradleigh is described by those who know her best as caring, helpful, creative, and artistic. She loves to draw and read books. Bradleigh enjoys figuring puzzles out and making them whole. She enjoys being active, especially riding her bike, playing kickball, and swimming. One of Bradleigh's teachers shared,

"Bradleigh is sweet and has a lot of potential."

Bradleigh deserves all the love, stability, and permanence that a forever family offers. Her forever family should be able to demonstrate the ability to be caring, kind, and genuine. The family for Bradleigh should also be capable of providing her with loving guidance and allow her to be active and exploratory. Bradleigh will blossom in the right family and will bring an abundance of love, laughter, and joy to the family dynamics.



LaDuffy (age 12)

LaDuffy is a very affectionate, active, and playful little boy. He enjoys time outside; kicking balls, running, riding his bike, and playing basketball. He has even participated in the Special Olympics. One of LaDuffy's favorite places to visit is the playground. LaDuffy also loves all types of music. His favorite television show is SpongeBob. It has been shared, LaDuffy "is funny and often a joy to be around."

LaDuffy deserves all the love and stability that a committed forever family offers. His family will require patience and must be strong advocates for LaDuffy to ensure his needs are properly met. LaDuffy's forever family will need to provide him with structure, highlighted with love and affection. The forever family for LaDuffy should be open and committed to allowing him to remain connected to his siblings.



Wyatt (age 14)

Wyatt is a quirky, intelligent, caring and hopeful young man, who advocates well for himself. He enjoys playing with electronics and his globe. His hobbies include things associated with robotics, space, and video games. His favorite school subjects are social studies, science, and robotics. Wyatt's enjoyment of science has influenced his passion and desire to become a solar engineer.

Wyatt's foster mother states that he is well mannered and will benefit from the guidance of a loving family with a willingness to provide structure, patience, and encouragement. He will benefit from a family that will love him unconditionally and provide him with understanding and encouragement as he continues to develop and grow.



Xavier (age 16)

Xavier is a humorous, considerate, and all-around great young man. He likes to play basketball and go camping. He has recently found interest in going to the gym and working out. Xavier enjoys math and attending drama club. He excels in school and is currently at the top of his class. He makes the A Honor Roll while taking AP and Honors classes. He prides himself on doing very well in school and being the best he can be academically. Xavier would love to play in

the NBA and aspires to be an athletic trainer.

Xavier has requested a family with an active lifestyle and interest in sports. The agency is requesting a loving adoptive home that has a strong male role model. The prospective family will need a love and desire to support him academically as he continues to excel and to support ongoing contact with his sister.

Sophie, Hailey, and Darrow (ages 10, 13, and 8)

Hailey and her two younger siblings, Sophie and Darrow, are seeking a family to call their own.

Hailey is a sweet young lady whose smile will light up a room. Hailey is tremendously advanced in academics and interpersonal relationships. She is a protector and cares deeply for her two younger siblings. She loves to laugh, hang with her friends, get her nails done, and spend time on her phone. She is intelligent, observant, creative, and loves to help others. Hailey has mentioned a desire to enlist in the military when she is older.

Sophie is an adorable girl with big brown eyes and long flowing hair. She has a contagious laugh. She is extremely intelligent and will go very far in life. Energetic, sweet, and caring, Sophie is blossoming into her own personality. Her easygoing, funny personality allows her to connect with everyone she meets. Sophie is artistic, loves to draw, and has a passion for photography.

Darrow is the youngest of the trio. He's described by those that know him best as an energetic, curious, sweet, intelligent, playful little guy. He loves to be silly and enjoys entertaining those in his company. "Darrow is a loving child with a big heart. He cares deeply for those around him." Darrow likes to be active and engage in activities such as soccer and basketball. Darrow also enjoys drones, Beyblades, and Nerf guns.



This awesome sibling group dreams of having a loving family who is just as active and engaging as they are. The three want to be adopted and belong to a family together. The trio would greatly benefit from loving parents who consistently promote a nurturing environment that is accentuated by guidance, structure, and reassurance. The children want a family who will support and encourage birth family connections.



Foster Family Alliance of NC: Together we can!

The Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina would like to thank each and every one of you for all that you do for our families. We celebrate every victory that you and your children have overcome together.

As we announced in the last *Fostering Perspectives*, we are working with organizations throughout the state to host conferences. We are still discussing whether to have one large summit or hold mini-summits throughout the state. This is a great opportunity and we are looking for help.

This summit is geared toward families who are interested in fostering, current foster/adopt/kinship families, and any agency or person serving our foster community. We have an energy-packed day, guaranteed to ignite the fire in each person attending. Tracks offered at the summit will include:

- **Potential Foster Families.** Geared toward families interested in fostering, this track is a great opportunity for agencies to send families who are interested or in the process of becoming licensed to get some training hours. We will have current families in the community as well as trainers talking about the process and answering questions.
- **Shared Parenting.** Come hear about shared parenting and success stories of families who have worked together to reunify kids to their families.
- **Fostering Teens.** We have partnered with LINKS and SaySo to have teens and current foster parents talk about fostering teenagers and current objectives in our state to help young adults transition from foster care.
- **Behavior/Trauma.** Trainers from the community will help us understand your children's behavior and provide tools to help you support your child. We will also hear from families who have faced challenges and learn how they helped their kids.
- **Navigating the System.** Learn more on how to navigate various systems we, as foster parents, face. This training will include helping you understand your rights, as a foster parent, when it comes to navigating the legal system, school, and medical care.

Benefits for attending the summit include 6+ hours of training, all meals included, door prizes, awards, and a celebration banquet! We will also have agencies from your community, who serve you and your kids, as vendors with tables to get information, ask questions and connect for services. For more information, visit ffa-nc.org or call 800/578-7770.

About FFA-NC

Our organization began more than 40 years ago (in 1975) as the North Carolina Foster Parent Association and changed its name in 2006 to the North Carolina Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (NCFAPA). Now, as FFA-NC, we have recommitted to bringing together parents and agencies across the state to better serve our children. We are grateful for the continued support of the NC Division of Social Services and other funding agencies.



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Interested in a board position? Please contact Maurita McCorkle (mccorkle@ffa-nc.org).

How Do You Know You Are a Foster Parent?

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



by Donna Foster and Joanne Scaturro

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:



Did you ever have a social worker you really liked? What made that person special?

(Responses should be 200 words or less.)

DEADLINE: August 4, 2020

E-mail submissions to jdmcmaho@unc.edu or mail them to: Fostering Perspectives, Family & Children's Resource Program, 100 Europa Dr., Suite 571, CB# 5220, Chapel Hill, NC 27517. Include your name, age, address, and phone number. In addition to receiving the awards listed 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 an award.

Seeking Other Writing Submissions

Submissions can be on any theme. There is no deadline for non-contest submissions: submit your work at any time.



Join the Fostering Perspectives List!

To be notified by email when new issues appear online, go to <http://eepurl.com/brPe9b> and sign up.

Get in-service training credit for reading this newsletter!

Enjoy *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 v24 n2

1. How can resource parents keep children connected with their families, even when face-to-face visits aren't possible?
2. What words would you use (or have you used) to explain shared parenting to a child or youth in your care?
3. What are Children's Home Society and Guilford County doing to establish effective partnerships between foster and birth parents?
4. Name three of Amy Huntsman's suggestions for doing shared parenting when there's a concern about safety.
5. What do the stories of Anna, Cora, and Delilah say to you about shared parenting past the age of 18?
6. Foster care alumni offer a variety of advice about shared parenting in this issue. Which of their suggestions struck you most?
7. Who is eligible to participate in the Foster Care 18 to 21 program? What are the benefits of this program?
8. What are the three stages of birth parent grief Donna Foster talks about in her article?
9. Corey Best talks about how important it is to share power with birth parents. What does this mean to you as a resource parent?
10. Which young person described in this issue enjoys Beyblades?

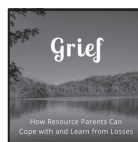
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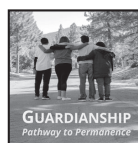
A learning site for North Carolina's foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers

The NC Division of Social Services is proud to offer fosteringNC.org, a learning site for our state's resource parents. This site features online courses, webinar recordings, videos and podcasts, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Free Online Courses Include:



Grief: How Resource Parents Can Cope with and Learn from Loss. This 1-hour course explores common reactions to loss and offers effective strategies for working through grief. Features video interviews in which current and former resource families share their experiences of grief and healing.



Coming in July 2020 Guardianship, Pathway to Permanence. This 1-hour course provides resource parents with the information they need to understand guardianship in North Carolina and assess what it would mean for their family and for a child or youth in their care.

Foster parents are encouraged to talk in advance to their supervising agency about obtaining training credit through fosteringNC.org.

Join the fosteringNC.org List

To sign up to receive news and updates go to:

<http://eepurl.com/cEiAYP>

Scan this QR code to go directly to the site



fostering perspectives

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