

# fostering perspectives

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

## COVID-19: Rising to the occasion

They say experience is the greatest teacher. But what can you learn when your teacher is a pandemic?

As it turns out, plenty. Since COVID-19 hit in March, life has been stressful, tiring, and hard. The virus has been a crash course in society-wide disruption.

But this isn't the pandemic's only lesson. In North Carolina's foster care program, resource parents, youth, GALs, and other stakeholders have made new discoveries

about our resilience and our ability to overcome obstacles.

Faced with uncertainty and shifting new demands—including the 3 Ws, maintaining connections virtually, and online schooling—we have repeatedly risen to the occasion.

In recognition of this fact and to provide the support you need, this issue of *Fostering Perspectives* shares information, tips, and lessons learned to help you continue serving children, families, and communities.

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## When COVID hit, NC's resource parents stepped up

Who can you count on when times are hard? If the COVID-19 crisis has taught me anything, it's that when challenges arise, resource parents step up.

How do I know? Through my work overseeing the licensing of North Carolina's foster parents I have had the privilege to hear about some of the many extraordinary actions resource parents have taken since the pandemic began, despite the risk to themselves.

For example, some resource parents have deliberately opened their homes to children who have COVID-19. Others have asked for waivers to non-safety related licensing rules so they could care for young people with no place to go. When his mother was hospitalized with COVID-19, one man even moved into her house and became a licensed foster parent himself so that the child in her care would not have to move.

Or consider the letter in the sidebar from Diana Adams, one of North Carolina's resource parents. In her letter Ms. Adams shares what this time has been like for her and the children in her care. As she makes clear, the pandemic has been hard on everyone, but in a surprisingly short time we've adjusted. We've found a new kind of balance.

North Carolina has many wonderful, dedicated resource parents. We know this time has had so many challenges, but we hope that you have found some blessings and more time together. Thank you for rising to the challenges that have come before you and for being the safe, secure, home for our children.

Jodi Franck is Foster Home Licensing Manager with the NC Division of Social Services.

### We've Learned How to Balance

The pandemic has helped us realize life is precious. With this virus we must protect our five children who we have in our home. The shut down is hard on us and the kids. It's tough explaining to them nothing is open and we really can't go anywhere. It's hard on their little lives: playgrounds and parks closed, masks to be worn. The world is different than what we're used to.



Diana Adams

But we've had many successes during COVID time. We have learned to grow closer and spend more time with the kiddos—a lot more game nights and movie nights. The hustle and the bustle slows down, which is calming at times. And I believe we've all grown closer in trusting God's plan.

We have a great support group for our foster parents. We meet every Sunday over Zoom to connect and talk. This group is amazing and, on some days, lifesaving. We get to share stories, advice, and learn things that may work better with kids' behaviors.

When COVID started our kids could no longer see their bus driver, their friends, their teacher. They suffered great loss. Parents had to visit virtually, which was hard for my kids to understand. It was a very trying time.

Then schools went virtual and I became their teacher, as well as their foster mom. So 24/7 every single day became a very hard challenge. Of course when the new school year started it was different as well. They go two days in-person and then virtual for three. My kids are thankful for those in-person days even though they're learning more about social distancing. They get to go on the bus, have made friends, and love their teachers.

So, I think issues became hard when it started but we all have learned how to balance and understand how it's going to work. So far this year my three kids who attend school are thankful. Plus, it gives mom a break to tend to my other two littlest ones.

# The pandemic and protective factors by Jeanne Preisler


Even in times of stress, all families have strengths they can build on when they have the right supports. The Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework® gives us some tangible tools we can lean into during this pandemic and its aftermath.

Protective Factor	What It Is	Things You Can Do to Build Protective Factors During the Pandemic
<b>Parental Resilience</b>	Parental resilience is the ability to manage your reactions to stress and to function well enough when bad things happen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is okay to let your kids have some extra screen time if that is what makes it possible for you to take care of yourself.</li> <li>• Linger a little longer over your morning coffee/tea.</li> <li>• Look for moments of joy, no matter how small.</li> <li>• Look for ways your children are growing.</li> <li>• Pay attention to how you are feeling. For areas you need new parental strategies to overcome, reach out to <a href="https://nc211.org">nc211.org</a> or your friends to help.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Connections</b>	Staying connected to positive relationships such as family, friends, and neighbors can make parenting challenges easier.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect with someone every day, even if it is just a text exchange.</li> <li>• Make video play dates for your kids.</li> <li>• You and your children can use chalk on your driveway or sidewalk to write words of encouragement for those walking by.</li> <li>• Check on your neighbors. It helps our mental health when we support others!</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development</b>	Knowing what to expect as children grow can make parenting a lot easier.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To the best of your ability, keep up a routine (for you and your child). We all get off schedule and disorganized sometimes, but get back to routine as soon as you can.</li> <li>• Check to see if your child is hitting key developmental milestones by visiting <a href="https://healthychildren.org/">https://healthychildren.org/</a>.</li> <li>• Prioritize sleep and hydration for you and your child; both help you manage stress.</li> </ul>
<b>Concrete Support in Times of Need</b>	Being able to pay bills and have safe shelter, food, and clothing allow you to focus more on your children.	<p>The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is committed to helping your family. Please check out these resources if you need support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— <a href="https://nc211.org">https://nc211.org</a></li> <li>— 1-888-892-1162</li> <li>— Text “FOODNC” to 877-877 for help finding food for your child</li> <li>— <a href="https://nccare360.org">https://nccare360.org</a></li> </ul>
<b>Social and Emotional Competence of Children</b>	Children’s ability to: manage their emotions; communicate what they are feeling and experiencing; and build healthy relationships with their peers and adults.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infants and children are sensitive to the stress level of caregivers. Be as consistent and calm as you can.</li> <li>• The more positive attention you can give toddlers (30 hugs a day is a good goal), the less likely they will be to act out to get attention.</li> <li>• Ask children/youth what they’re concerned about and let them talk about their fears and missing friends. Help them see their feelings are okay.</li> </ul>

These suggestions come from the wonderful article *Building Resilience in Troubled Times: A Guide for Parents*. You can find it at <https://cssp.org/building-resilience-in-troubled-times-a-guide-for-parents/>.


One more thing. It can be easy to be overwhelmed by advice, even good advice. Here's a really short list that you can stick on the refrigerator or save on your phone:

- Taking care of yourself is good for you and for your kids. You can't pour from an empty cup.
- Be kind to yourself. No one is a perfect parent, and some days will be better than others.
- Give your kids positive attention, share moments of joy and laughter, and help them explore their own feelings. Structure is good, but so is flexibility!
- Stay connected and help your kids stay connected to the important people in your lives.
- Ask for help. And help others.



## The SCOOP on Managing Stress

<b>S</b> Stay connected to family and friends.	Social connections build resiliency.
<b>C</b> Compassion for yourself and others.	Self-compassion decreases trauma symptoms and stress.
<b>O</b> Observe your use of substances.	Early intervention can prevent problems.
<b>O</b> Ok to ask for help.	Struggling is normal. Asking for help is empowering.
<b>P</b> Physical activity to improve your mood.	Exercise boosts mood and lowers anxiety.

**HOPE  4 NC HELPLINE 1-855-587-3463**

# COVID-19 and the holidays by LeAnn McKoy

COVID-19 created the opportunity for the NC Division of Social Services to review its policies and practices to ensure the safety of children and families. We all have learned to wear masks, wash our hands more, and maintain physical distance from family and friends. New processes were adopted, while safety of children and families remained the priority for the Division and local agencies.

Local child welfare agencies were given guidance to ensure the safety of children, families, and workers during COVID-19. Here are a few examples of policy exemptions allowed during the pandemic:

- Agencies were allowed to use videoconferencing for some face-to-face visits.
- Agencies were approved to virtually facilitate *Deciding Together*, an individualized training for foster and adoptive parents.
- Telehealth appointments were encouraged to meet requirements for medical screenings of children and licensed foster and adoptive families.
- Local, state, private, and community stakeholders partnered to create strategies to meet the needs of children and families. Although there were some exemptions,

conditions of Rylan's Law were not waived. This state law requires local child welfare agencies to observe and document two successful visits at least seven days apart, each lasting at least one hour, and within 30 days of the court hearing where reunification is to be recommended. Maintaining these requirements demonstrates the state's commitment to children being safely reunified with their parents or legal guardians.

## Approaching Holidays

We may remain physically distant, but we can still strengthen our emotional connections to others. Here are some suggestions to keep children, youth, and families connected during the holiday season:

**Continue face-to-face visits whenever it is safe and permissible.** Parks and open areas are great places to visit while maintaining social distance. As always, make sure personal protection equipment (PPEs) are used whenever possible and appropriate for the child's age. Follow CDC guidelines (found here: <https://bit.ly/2RWiyMo>) and remember the 3Ws—Wear, Wash, and Wait.

**Be creative!** This is the perfect time to learn and share new skills or hobbies. Homemade



gifts and cards can help children and families communicate with those important to them. There are plenty of free virtual camps and workshops available online. When children and youth are online, please provide appropriate supervision and guidance.

**Use technology when allowed, under appropriate supervision.** Host virtual family game nights. Use teleconferencing to read bedtime stories. Encourage engagement beyond the minimum court ordered requirements, if possible. Talk with your social worker or case manager before making changes to the court ordered visitation plan.

For updates and resources related to COVID please visit the NC Department of Health and Human Services at <https://www.nc.gov/covid19>.

*LeAnn McKoy is a Foster Care & Adoption Policy Consultant with the NC Division of Social Services.*

## COVID-19 Resources for Resource Parents

### NC Resources

- **COVID-19 North Carolina Dashboard.** <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/dashboard>
- **General Child Welfare COVID-19 Guidance** (May 1, 2020). <https://bit.ly/3liuLOy>
- **Promotional Toolkit** to inform and educate North Carolinians about COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and preventative measures they can take to protect themselves and their loved ones. <https://bit.ly/3d1Md7p>
- **COVID-19 Video Playlist** from NCDHHS (range of COVID-19 topics in English and Spanish). <https://bit.ly/34s3K4t>
- **SlowCOVIDNC Exposure Notification App.** Download to help slow the spread of COVID-19. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/slowcovidnc>

### Testing Tools from NC DHHS

- **Check My Symptoms** allows people to enter their symptoms and determine if they should get tested for COVID-19. If they are recommended to be tested, they will receive a link to a list of nearby testing sites via email or text. <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/symptoms>
- **Find My Testing Place** allows people to input their county or ZIP code and access a list of nearby testing site locations online. <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/TestingPlace>



### National Guidance & Resources

Visit [coronavirus.gov](https://coronavirus.gov) for the latest updates.

The U.S. Children's Bureau recommends the following everyday preventative actions:



- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze; throw the tissue away immediately after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, as well.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. While it may seem simple, germs often spread this way.
- At the workplace, wash your hands frequently and practice caution when coming into contact with commonly touched surfaces like door handles, handrails, and elevator buttons.

### Follow CDC Guidance

The Children's Bureau also urges people to follow guidance from the CDC.

- **FAQ** specifically about COVID and children. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>
- **Guidance for households** will be relevant and helpful to resource families. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/home/index.html>

**Staying apart brings us together. Protect your family and neighbors.**

Stay home if:



You are sick.



You are at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

**If you leave home, know your Ws!**



**WEAR** a cloth face covering.



**WAIT** 6 feet apart. Avoid close contact.



**WASH** your hands often or use hand sanitizer.

@NCDHHS

#StayStrongNC





Amy Huntsman

# Telehealth therapy: The new normal

Therapy is an important tool for helping youth in foster care develop coping mechanisms and process trauma. It can be so helpful to have a safe place and an unbiased person to be honest with.

**Telehealth therapy**, also called “teletherapy,” is mental health treatment in which patients receive counseling from licensed therapists online, usually with a video-conferencing app or via phone, email, or text messaging. Many young people have switched their face-to-face therapy visits to telehealth during the pandemic. This keeps therapeutic relationships going even as the world continues to fluctuate.

As a parent of a child in therapy, instead of weekly transporting my daughter to therapy in town I now set her up in her bedroom on Zoom so she can interact with her counselor.

In all honesty, it's great. I love that I do not have to drive across town or get her early from camp, and she enjoys the novelty of using technology to continue her relationship and work. As a side benefit, using a video platform has boosted her tolerance for screen learning and taught her other skills she needs for virtual classroom learning.

When I asked her about teletherapy, Asheville-based child therapist Jillian Kelly told me child mental health providers have really rallied together to create forums to share telehealth techniques and interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. “We’ve been quite creative in adapting modalities like Play Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Ther-

apy (CBT) virtually,” Kelly says. “It’s led to some interesting conversations about using technology to meet the needs of children and families in years to come.”

According to Kelly, one benefit of telehealth is that it gives providers a glimpse into the home world of the child. “Being given ‘tours’ of their bedrooms or playrooms creates a rare window into the physical space they exist in. This opens up ideas for creating ‘cozy corners’ and other mindfulness-based spaces based on a clear assessment of what’s actually available.”

Two challenges of teletherapy with children can be maintaining their attention in a virtual session—this is especially true for young children—and ensuring safety. But these barriers can be overcome.

Kelly explains, “For children under age 7, I’ve found that engaging the caregiver as co-therapist on the other side of the screen is helpful and also powerful. With the caregiver as co-therapist, there is also a rich opportunity for continued growth and healing in between sessions given the caregiver can use these techniques and interventions any time.”

Some older kids and teens are actually more comfortable with telehealth than face-to-face therapy. Electronic devices are a critical part their lives, so it makes sense that some like connecting with their therapist on their phone without ever leaving their bedroom. For those who feel some stigma around therapy, telehealth gives them time with a clinician without the stress of having to travel or wait in an office lobby prior to the session.

Many young people have switched from face-to-face therapy visits to telehealth during the pandemic. Here are some tips for keeping that therapeutic relationship going even as the world continues to fluctuate.

Helpful tips for utilizing telehealth with children and youth in your home include the following:

- Create a safe, quiet, private space your child or youth can use for every teletherapy visit.
- Communicate with the provider prior to the session to relay strengths and areas of concern.
- Troubleshoot technical issues prior to the session.
- Keep paper, pencil, and other supplies handy for your young person to use if needed during their session.
- Manage your expectations. It may take time for your child or youth to feel comfortable with the new platform and virtual interactions.
- Ask questions! The clinician should be able to answer questions about your involvement, insurance coverage for telehealth, and whether teletherapy is the best option for your child.

*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 7 and 8.*

## Foster home licensing in NC during COVID-19 by Jodi Franck

Our entire world changed drastically and quickly with the emergence of COVID-19 in the United States and North Carolina. Licensing of foster homes had to change and adjust, too. After Governor Cooper declared a state of emergency in March 2020, foster care

**Our top priority was to ensure existing homes could remain licensed so placements would not be disrupted.**

agencies and the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS) began identifying areas of licensing that would be affected by the pandemic. Our top priority was to ensure existing licensed homes could remain licensed so that families would continue to receive financial support and children’s placements would not be disrupted.

First, NC DHHS identified areas that were likely to cause issues in relicensing. Fire inspections, medical examinations, and

home visits were all concerns, since our standard approach to these would not work while stay-at-home orders were in effect. With its legal counsel, NC DHHS ensured foster homes would be relicensed. Through the Governor’s

Executive Orders, areas of concern were addressed and creative solutions implemented. NC DHHS continues to work with supervising agencies to problem solve any remaining issues.

Teamwork is a core value for NC DHHS, and collaboration with foster care agencies and other stakeholders has been vitally important during this time. As a team, we continue to ensure families remain licensed, continue to license new families,

and always keep the safety and well-being of our children, youth, and families as our first priority.

*Jodi Franck is Foster Home Licensing Manager with the NC Division of Social Services.*





# COVID's impact on the transition to adulthood

by Jonathan Rockoff

Youth coming out of foster care face many challenges as they transition into adulthood. That's in normal times. Has the uncertainty of COVID added to the difficulty of this transition?

To learn about COVID's impact on youth transitioning from foster care to independence, I reached out to Michelle Blackmon, Program Coordinator at Fostering Bright Futures. Based at Wake Tech Community College, Fostering Bright Futures provides tutoring, mentoring, and financial support to help former foster youth pursue higher education. With Michelle's help, I connected with five foster care alumni, now enrolled at Wake Tech, to hear how COVID-19 has affected them and their plans for remaining happy and healthy. *(This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.)*

## How has COVID-19 changed your plans?

**Student 1:** COVID changed my plans slightly. The big things it changed were my travel plans and now I spend less time with friends and family.

**Student 2:** Although many of the things I was looking forward to have been canceled or changed, I realize things could be worse. I wanted to experience graduating by getting to walk the stage, but that didn't happen. I wanted to go on my trip that was planned as a celebration for graduating, but that got canceled. I was also laid off from my job, which really affected me emotionally.

**Student 3:** It's affected my mental health. I have been unable to attend three funerals, which has hindered my grieving process. It has strained relationships with people who are not following safety guidelines. Even though I long to see my friends and hug them, I don't trust that their definition of quarantine is the same as mine. I have a funeral this week for the 5th person I know that has died during this time. I will go, but I have a lot of anxiety about the guidelines that will be followed and not being able to comfort my best friends and parents.

Educationally, I had to start online classes, which was not easy. My spring semester was extended by three weeks to make up for the lost time/extra week for the school to get a plan together. That caused my summer courses to start immediately after the spring courses.

"I am still pursuing my dreams."

"I have been unable to attend three funerals, which has hindered my grieving process."

"It has strained relationships with people who are not following safety guidelines."

"Things I was looking forward to have been canceled or changed."

"Aside from losing my job, I think this time helped me get back in touch with myself."

**Student 4:** I put in my two weeks' notice at my restaurant job because of the stress and tension caused by COVID-19.

**Student 5:** COVID-19 made me realize how quickly things can change. Fortunately, I have a support team that consists of Ms. Michelle (Blackmon), the rest of the Fostering Bright Futures team, the Hope Center at Pullen, my aunt, and my boyfriend.

## What are you doing to remain happy and healthy in 2020?

**Student 1:** Aside from losing my job, I think this time helped me get back in touch with myself. I do a lot more outdoor activities and my physical and spiritual health has been improving. I try to keep a positive attitude and not give up. I realize it's not easy for anyone right now and I want to do as much as I can to help my friends and family.

**Student 2:** I am still pursuing my dreams. I have found that looking forward to things is the best piece of advice I have for staying motivated and healthy during these times. My parents and family have been a support during COVID-19.

**Student 4:** Personally, it has really helped me realize I need time to myself—I blocked off a day for self-care.

## Conclusion

The transition from foster care to independence was already difficult to navigate. Clearly COVID-19 has made it even harder for youth. But despite the new challenges they have faced, I'm struck by their ability to bounce back and keep moving forward. If anyone understands resilience, it's these youth and young adults.

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

## COVID-19 Resources for Those Served by NC LINKS

COVID-19 is impacting us all. NC LINKS can help. NC LINKS, a program of the NC Department of Health and Human Services, assists youth and young adults between ages 13 and 21 who are or have been in foster care with education, employment, pregnancy prevention, and other activities.

**LINKS**

Following are six resources especially relevant to the pandemic that NC LINKS youth should know about:

1. Supplemental Foster Care COVID-19 Payments
2. Additional LINKS Transitional and Housing Funds
3. Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)
4. Foster Care to Success
5. NC 2-1-1 North Carolina's COVID Information Hub
6. Assurance Wireless

To learn more visit <https://files.nc.gov/ncdhs/documents/files/dss/dcdl/childwelfareservices/CWS-18-2020a.pdf>

## fostering perspectives (Nov. 2020)

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

# Pandemic struggles and lessons of foster care alumni

Every generation has their challenges, their life altering events and lessons learned. Every lifetime comes fraught with trials and tribulations that seem insurmountable at first, unforgiving at best, and at times without end. Somehow though, time after time we manage to pull through and come out stronger, wiser, and more prepared for the next game changer.

At least that is what I've experienced, witnessed, and heard from young adults just like me about their experiences with the pandemic and the new reality the virus left us in its devastating wake. Being of the substitute care community, we know all about rising to the challenge, adapting, and persevering. Yet this doesn't mean we don't struggle, occasionally stumble, or meet our own dead ends.

Even though my challenges differed slightly in comparison to those I've spoken to, we still shared some of the same struggles living through COVID-19. Firstly, I and everyone I spoke with is in the age 20-28 range and was previously in the substitute care system. Another similarity is that we all had some experience of the structural decay, lim-

**Being of the substitute care community, we know all about rising to the challenge, adapting, and persevering. Yet this doesn't mean we don't struggle.**

ited accessibility, and depletion of vital household resources caused by the pandemic.

Personally, my studies were severely affected by the initial atmosphere the crisis began with—reminiscent of some science fiction horror flick—disrupting education systems everywhere. I still pressed on trying to get through the semester ignoring my anxiety, the news reports, and my fear.

Anger replaced all of this when schools started to slowly evacuate their campuses and cancel classes to be replaced with virtual classrooms. One young lady I talked to felt she had no time to recover from the sudden changes as well as the various social movements that began making their voices heard at the same time. In response to stress “I just lost it!” she says.

“I paid for classes that I did not get to take,” lamented one male student, no doubt expressing the exact sentiments of many displaced students. I was living in the dorm of my university and had basically transferred half my life to a new city. I became homeless, I didn't work, and funds sent from relief aid

and school refunds did not last.

I struggled and still struggle, but at least I have only myself to worry about. A single mother and sole breadwinner of her household told me, “I became a teacher and quarantine specialist on top of having to still find ways to provide and be a parent.” These conditions put a strain not only on family life but on the children who have also been displaced from their normal reality.

There are people so negatively affected from being away from their families, jobs, and being able to go out that a rise in depression along with other mental illnesses is something that is becoming more apparent.

What have I and those I spoke to learned from COVID? The pandemic led some of us to discover new passions. Others have been reminded of old flaws.

I have learned not to stress so much. I have hope that as fall approaches change will come with it. Good or bad, we will persevere.

*Shanita Dildy-Goings is an alumna of foster care, a member of SaySo, and a college student in North Carolina.*



**Shanita Dildy-Goings**

## Overcoming “the disconnect” is key

by Amy Huntsman and Maurita McCorkle

Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from a tough situation. Although the concept is simple, putting it into action can be tough for resource parents during normal times. With a pandemic, a contentious election, and civil unrest all going on, it can be even harder.

The good news? Finding joy and trying new experiences can help you and your family overcome feelings of disconnectedness, cultivate positive habits, and build closer relationships. To help, we'd like to offer few suggestions for boosting your resilience to the stresses everyone's facing these days.

COVID-19 has closed gyms, pools, and other exercise facilities, but that does not mean exercise is or should be off the table. Exercise helps us maintain health, prevent weight gain, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve sleep (Penn Medicine, 2020).

In these times, exercise can look like a bike ride with the kids, a walk around the block, or an online yoga class. On the internet you'll find exercise programs for all health levels. Some even allow the whole family to exercise at the same time. We recommend “Cosmic Kids Yoga” with Jaime Amor. Her free YouTube sessions intertwine relaxing yoga with familiar stories in a way that's fun for all ages.

Staying connected through conversations with loved ones we can't see in person is quite important. There are lots of apps out there to help. Some even let you connect with friends and family face-to-face, but on your own time. For example, Marco Polo bills itself as the “video walkie talkie.” It lets you send quick video messages back and forth with your friends. With another platform, WhatsApp, you can make free international calls as

long as you have Wi-Fi. Now you can talk to that long lost friend in Europe without worrying about data charges or using minutes!

Is getting creative your strength? How about some of these fun activities: dress up dinners, glow stick dance parties, or painting and hiding rocks in the neighborhood for others to find. One family we know is cooking food from across the world. Every week they pick a different country, learn a bit about it, then on the weekend they cook a dish from the country to share. They're starting with Afghanistan and ending in Zimbabwe.

Connection with your partner is also a priority. Without our closest supports, hardships can seem defeating. Take time to have a date night at the house! Set up your spare room to be a lounge after the kids go to bed. With a couple of candles, a glass of tea or wine, and your favorite Spotify channel you can pretend you are



somewhere fancy, even if it's really just the craft room under cover.

Finding resiliency outlets is good for your kids as well as for you. By including them in activities and modeling the importance of self-care, you're teaching them strategies and habits that will serve them for a lifetime.

We all have a deep need to connect. When that need is met, we're better able to meet life's challenges. Connection! This is how we'll make it through to that day when we can go back to having dance celebrations with everyone we know.





# Kin caregivers and the pandemic by Glenda Clare

While COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for all North Carolinians, grandfamilies have been especially hard hit. More than 89,000 North Carolina children and youth are members of grandfamilies created when a grandparent or other family member raises the child of a relative unable or unwilling to parent. Although most heads of grandfamilies are under age 60 and working, nearly a third are older and therefore among the highest risk populations impacted by COVID-19.

It is virtually impossible for older kin caregivers to socially distance from the children in their care. For all practical purposes, these relatives are first responders. They are scared for their health and concerned about what will happen to them if they get sick. Yet they are there every day to provide love and care for those they are raising.

In this article I would like to acknowledge common challenges faced by grandfamilies during the pandemic and present resources that may help them cope.

## Common Challenges and Resources

**The 3 Ws.** Many grandfamilies are following the mandate to wear a mask, wait 6-10 feet apart, and wash hands frequently. Little ones as young as 5-6 years old are wearing masks. Getting children to wear them properly can be tough, but families are making an effort. To keep a 6-10 feet distance, when possible

For all practical purposes, these relatives are first responders.

grandfamilies are keeping children at home or taking them to child care facilities skilled in helping children to keep their distance. Regular and thorough hand washing is becoming a family occasion as adults join children in handwashing and singing 20-second songs such as "Happy Birthday," "Baby Shark," or "Splish Splash."

**Food & Medication.** Accessing food and medication without leaving home is a struggle. When possible and appropriate, caregivers are encouraged to leave children at home and use early hour access to stores reserved for persons with special needs. Some food assistance may be provided by schools and by child care and senior care centers. Pharmacies are also making it cheaper and easier to get prescriptions delivered during the pandemic. If you need help with food and medical assistance programs, reach out to 211 for more information.

**Technology & Staying Connected.** Internet access is important to get current up-to-date information and for students learning at home. Unfortunately, some older caregivers don't use the internet and may not have electronic devices. There is a need to provide training to grandfamilies and share information about how to access free and low-cost internet and electronics.

## Caregiving, Health, & Well-being

**Visits with Birth Parents.** Grandfamily caregivers are fearful of violating court agreements. They are also concerned about the

increased risk of exposure to the virus that in-person visits can bring. The courts and child welfare systems have provided little guidance. Grandfamilies need more information.

**Talking with Children & Youth about Coronavirus.** Children and youth need reassurance and factual, age-appropriate information. The following may help:

- *Self-Care Time at Home* – <https://bit.ly/2RBlaEQ>
- *5 Ways to Help Teens Manage Anxiety About the Coronavirus* – <https://nyti.ms/3ca12nD>
- *Caring for Children in Foster Care During COVID-19* – <https://bit.ly/3hyMWgU>

**Self-Care for Caregivers.** The pandemic is stressful. When considering physical health, caregivers can contact their primary care doctor and insurance company to get telemedicine appointments. Local pharmacies can be contacted to get home delivery of prescriptions.

The stress of some families may be compounded by caregivers' age or chronic illness. It is important to manage anxiety and stress. The following resources may help:

- *Coping with Stress* – <https://bit.ly/32BGL7A>
- *Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty* – <https://bit.ly/3mr8rnD>
- *Managing Family Stress During COVID-19* – <https://bit.ly/2HbbtvZ>

Glenda Clare is the Founder of the Fragile Families Network "It takes MORE than Love" project, a Family Partner Specialist at the Center for Family and Community Engagement, and a former kinship caregiver.

# SaySo welcomes new program coordinator

SaySo welcomes Cherie Watlington as the new SaySo Program Coordinator. Cherie grew up in North Carolina. After graduating from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (A&T) with a Bachelor in Social Work, she attended North Carolina State University and earned a Masters in Social Work. She is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

Cherie's work experience includes facilitating batterer intervention groups and program management in reunification services geared towards connecting birth parents with services needed to regain custody of their children.

Cherie currently lives in Wake County. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, anime, and the occasional crochet project. She also loves various types of music, particularly from the 60's to the 80's.

Cherie is passionate about child welfare and supporting families in ways that will lead to better generational outcomes. She is looking

forward to the work she will be doing with SaySo in supporting youth.

## In Other News

SaySo welcomes its 2020-21 Young Adult Leadership Council. We have 12 council members ages 14-24 representing Forsyth, Orange, Pender, Charlotte, Johnston, Union, Wake, Rutherford counties.



Cherie Watlington

## 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.

[www.saysoinc.org](http://www.saysoinc.org) • email: [sayso@chsnc.org](mailto:sayso@chsnc.org)





## Writing Contest

# What makes my social worker special

When agencies evaluate child welfare social workers, they seldom ask for input from children and youth in foster care. Yet many are only too qualified: they have seen enough child welfare professionals come and go to know what good social work looks like.

In an effort to draw on this untapped expertise and to celebrate the successes of North Carolina's caring professionals, *Fostering Perspectives'* latest writing contest asked kids in foster care if they ever had a social worker they really liked, and what made that person special.

Their responses were enlightening. In addition to telling us about some special people—including Catawba County's Beth Feimster, Durham County's Filicia High and Carol Allison, Haywood County's Amanda Emery, and Randolph County's Kim Scruggs—the letters we received painted a clear picture of what children value in social workers, such as:

- **Staying Power.** Kids liked social workers who stuck by them and supported them year after year.
- **Commitment to Family.** Many praised social workers for keeping them connected with their siblings, birth parents, and extended family.
- **Dedication.** Kids valued workers whose actions (e.g., sending birthday and holiday cards, taking them out to eat) showed they really matter to them.
- **Connection.** Children loved social workers who were accessible and engaging. Some saw their workers as friends who appreciated them for who they were. Others loved their workers for being role models and counselors who helped them develop the skills they will need to succeed as adults.

If you spend time with kids in foster care, this list probably holds no surprises for you. Still, we hope it is useful. Next time you evaluate yourself, think about your work in terms of the qualities that matter to children and youth. As these young people have shown, your performance in these key areas can make a big difference.



### David, age 13

I have been in foster care for about three years. My first and current social worker, **Beth Feimster**, is great. She was great in the beginning and even better now.

She had to stop being my social worker for a little while.... but then she came back. She is just as nice, funny, and outgoing as I remembered. A time I will always remember is when Beth introduced me to my dad. At Christmastime Beth really set me up with some great Christmas presents. She also helped me decide the right family to live with. I am about to be adopted and that's because of Beth helping me. I have really liked having her as my social worker because she seems to really care about me.

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

*I am about to be adopted and that's because of Beth helping me.*

1

### Brittany, age 17

**Kim Scruggs** was the best social worker I had when I was in foster care. . . . When I had team meetings I used to bake all sorts of stuff like brownies and cakes for her and my team. She helped set up all the visits with my biological sister, which I am grateful for. In 2017 she put my name in a contest to win a complete bedroom theme makeover of my choice. She is the best and I miss her so much. She also finalized my adoption on February 13, 2017. Without her I don't know where I would be. . . . What made Kim so special was that she cared for me. When I was having a bad day she would make it better. She made my adoption go through—it took a long time, but she did it. She never forgot my birthday.

BRITTANY RECEIVED \$50 FOR TAKING SECOND PRIZE.

*Kim Scruggs cared for me. When I was having a bad day she would make it better.*

2

### Shatavia, age 9

My favorite social worker is **Ms. Jasmine** because she makes me feel safe. She also makes me feel happy. . . . When I first moved to my foster home she took me out to eat so I could feel comfortable about living in my new foster home. Now I feel better and the foster home is fun and we do fun projects. SHATAVIA RECEIVED \$25 FOR TAKING THIRD PRIZE.

*Ms. Jasmine makes me feel safe.*

3

### Jesse, age 17

My current social worker is my favorite. She expects only the best out of me and .... doesn't let me slack off and inspires me to do what is best for me. I don't always agree with her, but she has helped me become a more independent young woman. She's honest with me and supports me in every way possible. She encourages me to join the Foster Care 18 to 21 program so that I can have the best future possible including a great college education. She is the reason I want to be in a social work field to help other children just like she does so well. She is an amazing role model and what every social worker should strive to be like.

JESSE RECEIVED \$20 FOR HAVING HER ESSAY PUBLISHED.

*She encourages me to join the Foster Care 18 to 21 program so that I can have the best future possible.*



# My favorite social worker

Norah, age 11

**Ms. Nicki** she was so considerate and relaxed. I really liked her because we could relate. I almost always felt so special as I sat beside her. She used to come to my house and we would do cartwheels in the hallways and splits in the kitchen. When she left I felt kinda angry and sad. I will remember her forever. She was also really good at calming down my brother, which is very good because I love my brother and he gets angry very easily. I also cherish the way she listens and then tries help.

*I felt so special as I sat beside her.*

Anonymous, age 14

I have the best social worker ever. My siblings and I live in three different homes that are several counties apart. She goes out of her way to help us. She helped open communication between my siblings and me and with my birth family. . . .

*She helped open communication between my siblings and me and with my birth family.*

My social worker, along with child services, worked really hard looking for a forever home for my sister. I was so happy they worked hard to make this happen because I get to talk to my sister unsupervised via video chat as long as we want. It makes me so happy to hear her laugh and smile and talk about all the fun and wonderful things she gets to do. . . . My brother was able to move to a facility that has less restrictions; he is happy now and we get to talk more because of the move.

I'm thankful for everything she has done for our family. She's more like family than a social worker.

Makayla, age 14

**Mr. Macon** was way more than a social worker. He was my friend and even a father figure at times. My dad wasn't able to come eat lunch with me...so Mr. Macon came. He came to school events and sometimes we would go to the park and talk about how we were doing. He helped me through a lot when things were rough. When I was in the process of being adopted, he even came to see my new house and my new family. He will always be special to me.

*My dad wasn't able to come eat lunch with me...so Mr. Macon came.*

Carli, age 12

**Amanda Emery** is amazing. She changed me as a person. . . . She always wanted my opinion before she made a choice. . . . Amanda would always look at me as her friend, not as her client. She was and still is my favorite friend and social worker.

## Special Social Workers

My favorite social worker is **Christy Furr**. There are a lot of things that make her special. For one, she helps me the best she can with anything and everything. She also is very nice to me but corrects me when I do something wrong. She has done a lot for me....I can call her anytime and she will pick up. Well, at least most of the time. She loves to help people the best she can and I love that about her....She is the best social worker to me and I hope she knows.

— *Damien, age 13*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Filicia High** and **Carol Allison**....were always there for me. Carol would always like to laugh and have fun when she visited my foster families and me. She always made me want to look forward to her next visit. Filicia has been my social worker for a while and I just love her so much. She is very kind and sweet. I think Filicia is always happy to see my family and me and that makes me happy. She has always treated me as family and I treat her the same.

— *Eva, age 12*

\*\*\*\*\*

She was always there for me, even when her own family needed her. She always treated me like I was her own. When it was time for me to leave one foster family to go to another one she promised me she was always going to be my social worker. She never let down a promise. When I finally got adopted she always came to check on me and was always there for me, even when I wasn't her client anymore. — *Katrina, age 14*

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My social worker works day and night for us and I am so appreciative! She helps my mom get back on her feet and gives her tips and tricks to get us back. She sends me cards every holiday! She's like family to us. She even comes to my foster home and stands 6 feet apart [because of COVID-19] to talk to me and see how I'm doing! It's really funny when Christmas comes around—she will dress up as a reindeer and sing Christmas songs to us! My social worker is caring, loving, and [has been with me] the longest! . . . My social worker hasn't given up on me, even when I gave up on myself. I know one thing: my social worker is the best dang one out there! — *Trinity, age 15*

\*\*\*\*\*

One who really stood out to me was my guardian ad litem, **Mrs. Beth**. She was always so nice, generous, and genuinely cared about me. Once I was in school and I got called to the office. When I got to the office, there she was with Burger King. That day was the best day of 4th grade. Amazingly, she always got me Christmas and birthday presents. My birthday is four days after Christmas, so most people would get me one present for both. Every Wednesday, we would go to Wendy's and get Frosties and fries. We called it "Wendy's Wednesday's." What made all of these moments with Mrs. Beth special is that she never forgot me and treated me like I was the most important person in the world when we were together.

I have been adopted for two years and still talk with her about school, my interests, and what I got for Christmas. Through all the pain I experienced, she was one of the people who helped me find good things every day. — *Brandon, age 13*

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I was in foster care between 5-6 years and was taken from my mother and separated from my sisters at 7 years old. . . . Throughout the years I needed a social worker that was straight up with me. A few years later it was a miracle because I got what I needed, not what I wanted.

My social worker put me in a Level 3 group home where I stayed for almost four years. As the years passed, I got more support. I couldn't go back home. Do you really know what I mean by support? I mean God had a plan for me that was going to change the ways that I was living. He told me that it wasn't my mom's fault.

It wasn't only God who had a plan for me, it was my social worker. I thought it was strange to be adopted by a different colored family, but as the years passed my life changed. If my social worker would not have been there for me I wouldn't be living this wonderful life.

— *Ahngel, age 14*

*I can call her anytime and she will pick up.*

*Filicia is always happy to see my family and me.*

*My social worker hasn't given up on me, even when I gave up on myself.*

THE AUTHORS ON THIS PAGE RECEIVED \$20 FOR HAVING THEIR ESSAYS PUBLISHED.

# Social worker perspectives on COVID-19 by Jonathan Rockoff

During the pandemic, child welfare agencies have worked hard to ensure the safety of children and families. To get an inside view of this effort, I spoke with two North Carolina child welfare professionals.

Myca Jeter, Foster Care Director for Access Family Services, says after the pandemic hit her immediate concern was for resource families and children and youth in foster care. She says she asked, "How do we stabilize everyone? What should we be communicating?"

Rhonda Dawson, Permanency Planning Supervisor with Pitt County Department of Social Services, says she had the same reaction. "I thought, 'How do we keep the kids safe? Are we going to be able to achieve permanence? How will we maintain the mental health of our youth?'"

The pandemic highlighted the fact that everyone needs help sometimes. Access Family Services saw an increase in calls from resource parents that had never previously asked for help. "Everyone was seeing signs of wear and tear," Jeter says.

In Pitt County, some resource parents were understandably hesitant to leave home and wanted to do everything virtually. Dawson says her agency is as accommodating as possible.

## Finding Solutions

Modifying and increasing communication was a big part of agencies' response to COVID. "We started by reaching out to everyone individually at all levels, including foster parents," Jeter says. Her agency also began holding virtual town halls. Pitt County DSS started using Zoom and other virtual platforms.

Physical changes were needed as well. For example, staff had to be supplied with masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. Dawson says at her agency, "We try to do visits outside and even bought new furniture that is easily cleaned and sanitized for the visitation rooms."

Both Jeter and Dawson made it clear adapting to COVID has been a team effort. For instance, Access Family Services reached out to resource parents that had been on hold and asked them, if they were willing, to begin fostering again, even for respite. Jeter says, "We were honest and said 'this is a crisis where everyone needs to help.'"

Pitt County DSS initially worried COVID would cause staff to take leave. "Instead," Dawson says, "they're showing up every day and doing a great job keeping kids safe."

Jeter echoes this. "Staff really stepped up. They found low cost, fun, safe activities for families. We also started virtual support groups where resource parents from all over North Carolina who would never normally meet can come together and lift one another up."

## Takeaways

When I asked what she's learned so far from the pandemic, Jeter told me she has been struck by how helpful technology has been. "We are connecting parents from all over the state and they're enjoying the ability to interact and meet new supports on Zoom," she says. "Plus, our staff have more work/life balance because they can accomplish more without all the travel."

For her part, Dawson's been impressed by her agency's ability to create permanence for youth in the midst of a pandemic. She reports that in the first three months of lockdown from COVID Pitt County DSS finalized eight adoptions and 16 other youth exited foster care.

Both agencies continue to recruit resource families. To learn more, please visit Access Family Services (<https://bit.ly/2Suh6b5>) or Pitt County Department of Social Services (<https://bit.ly/2FbVzAY>).



"We were honest and said 'this is a crisis.'"

— Myca Jeter



## FFA-NC is here for you!

Welcome to the Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina!

If you are a foster, adoptive, or kinship family in North Carolina you are automatically a member of 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.

Currently we employ an Executive Director and have a board for which we are actively recruiting members. If you are interested in serving, please contact Alex Williams ([alex.williams@ffa-nc.org](mailto:alex.williams@ffa-nc.org)).

We are very excited about the opportunities ahead of us and look forward to serving you. For more information, please see our website at [FFA-NC.org](http://ffa-nc.org) and follow us on Facebook.

### FFA-NC Board



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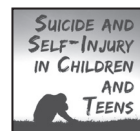
## A learning site for North Carolina's foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers

The NC Division of Social Services is proud to offer [fosteringNC.org](http://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:



**Human Trafficking 101 for Resource Parents.** This 90-minute course explains what human trafficking is, how to recognize it, and how North Carolina resource parents can respond.



**Suicide and Self-Injury in Children and Teens.** This 1-hour course helps foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers understand suicide and non-suicidal self-injury in children and adolescents and teaches them how to respond.

Foster parents are encouraged to talk in advance to their supervising agency about obtaining training credit through [fosteringNC.org](http://fosteringNC.org).

### Join the [fosteringNC.org](http://fosteringNC.org) List

To sign up to receive news and updates go to:  
<http://eepurl.com/cEiAYP>



Jennifer Nehlsen

# Guardians ad litem respond creatively by Jennifer Nehlsen

Guardians ad litem serve as the voice of the abused and neglected children in their community while the court works to determine the most appropriate permanent plan. Guardians ad litem (GALs) should have direct and sufficient contact with the child-client to carry out an independent and valid investigation of the child-client's circumstances and to know the child-client's expressed wishes. This level of contact (typically monthly) allows the GAL to make sound, thorough, and objective recommendations in the child-client's best interests. In-person visits with the child-client have traditionally been considered best practice.

Since COVID-19 struck, North Carolina's GAL program has had to re-examine how visits could be done while keeping child-clients, volunteers, and staff safe. Starting March 16, 2020, in-person contact between volunteers and child-clients was suspended by the state's GAL Administrator. Volunteers were coached by staff to find alternate methods to remain in contact with their child-clients.

Since March, volunteers have used phone calls, FaceTime, Zoom, Google Duo, letter-writing, and other methods to fulfill their requirement to have direct and sufficient contact with their child-clients. Starting at the beginning of August 2020, GAL District Administrators were given the ability to approve volunteer requests to perform in-person visits as long as the decision took into account designated risk-assessment, health and safety protocol, and supervision requirements.

## Virtual Visitation: A Mixed Experience

GAL staff were recently asked to share their impressions of how the shift from in-person to virtual visitation has gone. There has not been one consistent experience. As the following shows, it differed district to district, GAL volunteer to GAL volunteer:

- Some report they have more contact with their child-clients since instituting virtual visits.
- Some report the quality of the visits has been diminished, especially with younger children.
- Some say it has been difficult to establish rapport if no in-person visits had taken place before COVID hit.
- Many expressed concern that they can't tell whether someone is off-screen preventing the child-client from talking freely during the virtual visit.
- Volunteers who never used technology said they learned to adapt for the benefit of their child-clients.
- Some report that working with the placement provider to figure out the best method for virtual visits has been tricky.
- Limited internet access has posed an access problem in large swaths of the state.
- Without the limitations placed on a volunteer's time for travel, some volunteers have been able to take on multiple child-clients, which has been a plus for districts with unassigned caseloads.
- Staff no longer need to request a courtesy volunteer from another county if a child-client has been moved—the original GAL can maintain their relationship with the child-client virtually.
- Having the placement provider hold the phone so a child can demonstrate a new skill
- Sharing knock-knock jokes
- And my personal favorite, creating a video of the volunteer's pet with the volunteer's voice inserted into the video to make it look like the pet was talking to the child.

*"The most important thing is just making sure the children know I'm here for them. I'll be a constant in their lives through this unfamiliar time."*  
—GAL volunteer

Virtual visits have been a mixed experience for GALs and their child-clients across the state. The vast majority recognize that the work of GAL has not changed, just the way the work needs to be undertaken. All look forward to being able to see their child-clients in-person again when it is safe to do so. Interestingly, many volunteers intend to continue using virtual technology options to supplement in-person visits.

Allison Hall, a volunteer in District 10 since 2016, captured what most staff and volunteers are feeling. "For me, the most important thing of all is just making sure the children know I'm here for them. I'll be a constant in their lives through this unfamiliar time and they can count on me to be a source of support."

*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.volunteerfocal.org](http://www.volunteerfocal.org).*

## Necessity Sparks Creativity

All volunteers report a need to be much more creative in their efforts to plan and participate in virtual visits. Here are some of the creative methods volunteers used to connect with child-clients:

- Bringing their pets onto the screen during a virtual visit to show the child
- Playing games together like 20 Questions, MadLibs, and Simon Says
- Asking the child to bring their favorite toy or book on the virtual call
- Drawing pictures together
- Bringing their device on a walk through their yard or garden
- Adding stickers and changing frames in Facetime
- Reading books together
- Cooking lessons for teens

## Learn about Guardianship in NC

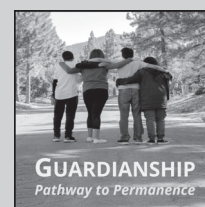
Every child and youth deserves the chance to grow up in a family that can provide them with love, hope, and stability. In North Carolina, when a child or youth is in foster care and neither reunification with birth parent or primary caregivers nor adoption is a good fit, **legal guardianship** is another way to find a forever home.

Unlike adoption, guardianship does not require a child to be legally free. A child becomes legally free when the courts terminate parental rights (TPR), a legal process that means birth parents or primary caregivers no longer have the right to make decisions for their child. TPR is required for adoption, but not legal guardianship, making guardianship a good option when it is in the child's best interests to stay connected to their birth parent/primary caregivers.

North Carolina offers support to families created through guardianship. KinGAP, or the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program, is one such support. This program offers financial assistance and Medicaid to those who meet eligibility requirements.

To make sure North Carolina's resource parents have the information they need if they are ever asked to consider guardianship, FosteringNC.org now features the free, 1-hour course *Guardianship, Pathway to Permanence*.

This course can also help you earn the training credit you need to renew your North Carolina foster home license. (Note: check with your agency first to ensure they will count this training toward your relicensure.) To take *Guardianship, Pathway to Permanence*, visit <https://fosteringnc.org/on-demand-courses/#guardianship>.







# Innovation in North Carolina's child welfare system during COVID-19

by Jamie Bazemore

The pandemic has brought loss and hardship to so many of us. But for me it has also been a reminder of how adaptable and creative humans can be. Even when faced with disruption and challenges, we somehow find a way to innovate and move forward.

Certainly this is what I've learned in talking with people in North Carolina's child welfare system. In the midst of a crisis, resource parents, social workers, and others across the state have made amazing adaptations. I want to share some of these with you now in the hope that when COVID is behind us we will continue to use these practices to make our child welfare system better than ever.

**Telehealth.** COVID has taught many of us how useful telehealth can be. For example, prior to the pandemic, Crossnore School and Children's Home made no use of telehealth. By July, 67% of their outpatient therapy was provided via telehealth or telephone.

"Telehealth is not appropriate for everyone," says Meredith Martin, Crossnore's director of program excellence. "But we have seen better results for some. Personally, I have seen increased vulnerability within the therapy space. Some of my adolescent clients appear more comfortable relating to me using telehealth. While we all look forward to life without COVID-19, I believe telehealth will always be a part of our future practice."

**Supporting Parents.** More agencies are using virtual trainings and support groups to increase their support for foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers. Many parents love these platforms because they don't require travel, childcare, or other barriers associated with in-person events.

"We found zoom to be a blessing," Rowan County foster parent Denise Russell told me. "We were headed home from our summer vacation and were still able to participate. It has been very helpful for our busy lives."

**Recruiting, Training, and Licensing.** Agencies are also using technology creatively so they can continue to recruit, train, and license new foster families. Rowan County DSS, for example, uses Zoom to hold information meetings for prospective resource parents. Social work supervisor Nadean Quarterman says this actually expanded their reach. "We found we could reach more people. One couple actually sat in on a meeting while sitting in the car on their date night!"

Rowan is also approaching foster parent pre-service training differently. "We are now facilitating *Deciding Together* and TIPS-

MAPP trainings twice a day at different times to ensure social distancing," says Quarterman. "I am hopeful we will continue to use online training post-COVID. We are able to reach more people due to the convenience of not leaving home."

Chatham County DSS made a similar pivot. When the pandemic hit, they quickly moved from in-person delivery of TIPS-MAPP to online offerings of *Deciding Together*. They even brought in contract trainers to support the shift. According to Chatham's Katelynn Canizarro, this enabled the agency to train over 20 families in 12 weeks—more than usual. In addition, the number of families interested in fostering doubled and more are waiting to be trained. Chatham's training team believes offering *Deciding Together* virtually helps them get to know families better, which may make licensing faster. Chatham County DSS is actively tracking that data as a part of their Diligent Recruitment and Retention Plan.

**Licensing Kin.** Children's Home Society of NC has discovered that the virtual preservice trainings for kinship families they've been holding since the pandemic began are broadening their geographic reach. Jamaica Pfister, their Director of Business Development and Advocacy, says offering a virtual *Caring for Our Own* training for kinship families allows them to serve kin in counties where they wouldn't necessarily have the resources to provide an in-person class. "For example," she says, "two families in Avery County will be attending the upcoming training."

**Family Time/Visitation.** For health and safety reasons, Phase 1 of quarantine limited face-to-face visits between children in foster care and their families. Families missed seeing each other in-person, but many agencies found video conferencing actually led to more frequent contact between young people and their families. Once COVID is behind us, agencies may wish to use both video conferencing and in-person visitation. This could lead to stronger connections between children and their families, more shared parenting between birth and resource families, and more visiting time overall.

**Engaging Families.** Using virtual and telephonic mediums to meet, provide interventions, and engage in discussions regarding permanency may also increase engagement of families involved with child welfare. "As a facilitator of Permanency Planning Review Meet-

I hope when COVID is behind us we will continue to use these practices to make our child welfare system better than ever.

ings," explains Chatham County DSS supervisor Wilder Horner, "I've noticed an increase in participation and attendance by parents, their support people, kinship providers, and parent attorneys."

A number of social workers told me they want to add telephone and video conferencing to their face-to-face contacts with families and children after COVID-19. Why?

Because they feel it could increase relationship building, make contact with families more frequent, and improve families' access to social workers.

**Back to Basics.** Many resource families and child-placing agencies report that families and their children and youth have "gotten back to basics" during the pandemic. There has been an increase in families spending time together—more family game nights, arts and crafts, daily family bike rides, neighborhood scavenger hunts, and more.

For youth at Falcon Children's Home and Family Services, getting back to basics has meant more time for art. After the pandemic set in, one of Falcon's house parents started a painting project for sibling groups. Many youth had never painted before quarantine. Now their beautiful art is selling in the community and being displayed in a "COVID-19 art gallery" on Falcon's campus.

Bee, a house parent at Falcon, says "The girls talk about how their anxieties are less when they're painting and how being creative has helped them venture out of their comfort zones. Seeing them make art they're proud of has been so rewarding."

North Carolina's child welfare system has worked diligently during COVID not only to continue to meet the safety, well-being, and permanency needs of children and families but to be innovative in doing so. As we continue to explore our "new normal," each one of us—families, social workers, child welfare and behavioral health agencies, the courts, and others—should try to identify instances where these challenging times have led to innovation, efficiency, and opportunity. We can then advocate for the ongoing use of these positive experiences to improve our system and the lives of children and families.

Jamie Bazemore, BSW, MSW is the Adoption Facilitator for Stephenson & Fleming, LLP and a Child Welfare Program Consultant for Cansler Collaborative Resources.

# Supporting children's emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

by Jessica Dym Bartlett, Jessica Griffin, Dana Thomson (Reprinted with permission from Child Trends)

*The following guidance, recommendations, and resources are provided by child trauma experts at Child Trends and the Child Trauma Training Center at the University of Massachusetts. The Center is housed at the University of Massachusetts with Child Trends as the lead evaluating agency, with funding from SAMHSA and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and additional support from HRSA.*

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently reports that the risk of exposure to COVID-19 is low for young Americans, research on natural disasters makes it clear that, compared to adults, children are more vulnerable to the emotional impact of traumatic events that disrupt their daily lives. This resource offers information on supporting and protecting children's emotional well-being as this public health crisis unfolds.

Amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, everyday life has changed and will continue to change for most people in the United States, often with little notice. Children may struggle with significant adjustments to their routines (e.g., schools and child care closures, social distancing, home confinement), which may interfere with their sense of structure, predictability, and security. Young people—even infants and toddlers—are keen observers of people and environments, and they notice and react to stress in their parents and other caregivers, peers, and community members. They may ask direct questions about what is happening now or what will happen in the future and may behave differently in reaction to strong feelings (e.g., fear, worry, sadness, anger) about the pandemic and related conditions. Children also may worry about their own safety and the safety of their loved ones, how they will get their basic needs met (e.g., food, shelter, clothing), and uncertainties for the future.

In addition to keeping children physically safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to care for their emotional health.

While most children eventually return to their typical functioning when they receive consistent support from sensitive and responsive caregivers, others are at risk of developing significant mental health problems, including trauma-related stress, anxiety, and depression. Children with prior trauma or pre-existing mental, physical, or developmental problems—and those whose parents struggle with mental health disorders, substance misuse, or economic instability—are at especially high risk for emotional disturbances.

In addition to keeping children physically safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to care for their emotional health. Below, we summarize recommendations for promoting the emotional well-being of children in the face of these types of adversities and provide a list of helpful resources. Because broader environments play an important role in supporting an individual's resilience to childhood adversity, this list supplements resources specifically for children and their families with those intended for educators, communities, and states, territories, and tribes.

## Recommendations

**Understand that reactions to the pandemic may vary.** Children's responses to stressful events are unique and varied. Some children may be irritable or clingy, and some may regress, demand extra attention, or have difficulty with self-care, sleeping, and eating. New and challenging behaviors are natural responses, and adults can help by showing empathy and patience and by calmly setting limits when needed.

**Ensure the presence of a sensitive and responsive caregiver.** The primary factor in recovery from a traumatic event is the presence of a supportive, caring adult in a child's life. Even when a parent is not available, children can benefit greatly from care provided by other adults (e.g., foster parents, relatives, friends) who can offer them consistent, sensitive care that helps protect them from a pandemic's harmful effects.

**Social distancing should not mean social isolation.** Children—especially young children—need quality time with their caregivers and other important people in their lives. Social connectedness improves children's chances of showing resilience to adversity. Creative approaches to staying connected are important (e.g., writing letters, online video chats).

**Provide age-appropriate information.** Children tend to rely on their imaginations when they lack adequate information. Adults' decisions to withhold information are usually more stressful for children than telling the truth in age-appropriate ways. Adults should instead make themselves available for children to ask questions and talk about their concerns. They might, for example, provide opportunities for kids to access books, websites, and other activities on COVID-19 that present information in child-friendly ways. In addition, adults should limit children's exposure to media coverage, social media, and adult conversations about the pandemic, as these channels may be less age-appropriate. Ongoing access to news and social media about the pandemic

and constant conversation about threats to public safety can cause unnecessary stress for children.

**Create a safe physical and emotional environment by practicing the 3 R's: Reassurance, Routines, and Regulation.** First, adults should reassure children about their safety and the safety of loved ones, and tell them that it is adults' job to ensure their safety. Second, adults should maintain routines to provide children with a sense of safety and predictability (e.g., regular bedtimes and meals, daily schedules for learning and play). And third, adults should support children's development of regulation. When children are stressed, their bodies respond by activating their stress response systems. To help them manage these reactions, it is important to both validate their feelings (e.g., "I know that this might feel scary or overwhelming") and encourage them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate (e.g., exercise, deep breathing, mindfulness or meditation activities, regular routines for sleeping and eating). In addition, it is essential to both children's emotional and physical well-being to ensure that families can meet their basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, clothing).

**Keep children busy.** When children are bored, their levels of worry and disruptive behaviors may increase. Adults can provide options for safe activities (e.g., outside play, blocks, modeling clay, art, music, games) and involve children in brainstorming other creative ideas. Children need ample time to engage in play and other joyful or learning experiences without worrying or talking about the pandemic.

**Increase children's self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is the sense of having agency or control—an especially important trait during times of fear and uncertainty. Children often feel more in control when they can play an active role in helping themselves, their families, and their communities. For example, children can help by following safety guidelines (e.g., washing their hands),

preparing for home confinement (e.g., helping to cook and freeze food), or volunteering in the community (e.g., writing letters or creating art for older adults or sick friends, sharing extra supplies with a neighbor).

**Create opportunities for caregivers (which may mean yourself!) to take care of themselves.** Children's well-being depends on the well-being of their parents and other caregivers. Caregivers must take care of themselves so they have the internal resources to care for others. To this end, adult caregivers can engage in self-care by staying connected to social supports, getting enough rest, and taking time for restorative activities (e.g., exercise, meditation, reading, outdoor activities, prayer). Seeking help from a mental health provider is also important when adults struggle with very high levels of stress and other mental health challenges.

**Seek professional help if children show signs of trauma that do not resolve relatively quickly.** Emotional and behavioral changes in children are to be expected during a pandemic, as everyone adjusts to a new sense of normal. If children show an ongoing pattern of emotional or behavioral concerns (e.g., nightmares, excessive focus on anxieties, increased aggression, regressive behaviors, or self-harm) that do not resolve with supports, professional help may be needed. Many mental health providers have the capacity to provide services via "telehealth" (i.e., therapy provided by telephone or an online platform) when in-person social contact must be restricted.

**Emphasize strengths, hope, and positivity.** Children need to feel safe, secure, and positive about their present and future. Adults can help by focusing children's attention on stories about how people come together, find creative solutions to difficult problems, and overcome adversity during the epidemic. Talking about these stories can be healing and reassuring to children and adults alike.



# 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](mailto:nc.kids@dhhs.nc.gov); web: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/social-services/child-welfare-services/adoption-and-foster-care>)



## **Cason, age 13**

This handsome young man has quite the personality. Cason is described by those that know him best as affectionate, funny, and inquisitive. He is outgoing, with an upbeat personality and always willing to engage. Cason is athletic and displays interest in a variety of sports. Cason loves being outdoors, hunting, fishing, and camping. Cason desires to be in a family setting and a treasured

member of a loving family. He would like a family who has common interests such as sports and other activities and will engage in these activities with him!



## **Abigail, age 16**

Abigail is a sweet, compassionate, and lovable teenage girl. She enjoys anything that consists of arts and crafts, making bead bracelets, necklaces, and coloring. She has expressed that her favorite subject is art! Her teachers, foster parent, and social worker describe her as being a very lovable child with an eagerness to

help. She is leadership driven and advocates well for herself. She has reservations about adoption but will do well and thrive in a loving and supportive two-parent home as an only child!



## **Aleia, age 9**

Aleia is a loving, beautiful young girl with a huge personality. She is sassy, sweet, and full of energy. She brings sunshine to a room with her contagious smile, laugh, and funny jokes. She enjoys word searches, coloring, and riding her bike. She especially enjoys listening to music and you may even hear her singing along with the lyrics. Aleia responds well to being given tasks and responsibility that will be helpful to others. She has shared her hopes of having a family who will "be nice." Aleia deserves all the love, stability, and permanence that a forever family offers. She longs to be with her forever family!



## **Daveun, age 9**

Daveun is a sweet, loving, silly, curious, and genuine young man who never meets a stranger. He is generally happy, chatty, funny, and known for speaking his mind. His hobbies are playing the Wii, Mario Video games, or drawing water towers in his sketch book. Daveun is ready for a loving, stable family, one that is committed to helping him learn and grow towards his full potential.



## **Tiquana, age 16**

Tiquana is a dynamic teen who is frequently described as helpful, observant, funny, and insightful. One of her teachers shared, "She is pleasant, personable, and a good conversationalist." She has a bright smile that lights up the room. Tiquana is a well-rounded young lady who has an array of interests. She enjoys physical activities, such as basketball, volleyball, and swimming. A few additional hobbies that interest her are doing hair, shopping, and playing board games. This young lady has a strong desire to be part of a loving family and has shared that she would like to have parent(s) who will help guide and assist her in being a successful person.



## **Cody, age 13**

Cody is waiting for you! He is an intelligent, caring, thoughtful young boy! He enjoys being outside, riding four-wheelers, and working in the garden. He would love a family that is willing to spend time with him and take him fishing! You can always catch Cody wearing his cowboy boots and camo. He loves country music

and is learning to play the violin. He has expressed his desire to stay in North Carolina or nearby surrounding areas. He would like an adoptive family that is active, enjoys country living, and understands that ongoing contact with his sister is very important!



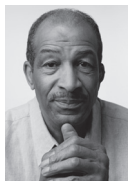
## **You Can Make a Difference**

North Carolina is committed to achieving permanence and well-being for youth! *Fostering Perspectives* contributes by featuring profiles of young people seeking permanence through adoption in every issue. This is just one of many recruitment efforts continuously undertaken by the NC Division of Social Services and the state's public and private child-placing agencies.

Since 2015, **17** of the young people featured in *Fostering Perspectives* have been placed with a forever family. Another **seven** have placements pending.

The takeaway? It really is possible to make a difference in the lives of our youth. Please continue to share this page with others and help us find families for children and youth who need them.





## A reader asks ...

# What does NC do to help youth achieve permanence?

North Carolina recognizes the importance of families and communities working together to raise and promote social awareness throughout the year. We believe every child and youth deserves the chance to grow up in a family that can provide them with love, hope, and stability. This article describes some of the many things North Carolina does as part of its commitment to timely permanency.

## National Awareness Months

Several months have been designated to make sure we continuously expand our efforts to raise awareness and support for reunification, kinship placements, foster care, and adoption. Our National Awareness Months include:

April: Child Abuse Prevention

May: Foster Care

June: Reunification

September: Kinship Care

November: Adoption

The theme of Adoption Month this year is “Engage Youth: Listen and Learn.” During November (and every other month) North Carolina families are encouraged to share their hearts and homes with older youth who are waiting to be adopted and at risk of aging out of foster care.

## Many Ongoing Efforts

North Carolina is committed every day of the year to (1) achieving permanence for children and youth in a timely manner, (2) providing them with safe and nurturing environments, and (3) ensuring families have what they need to meet the needs of children and youth.

To pursue these goals our state uses the NC Kids Adoption Exchange Program, the Diligent Recruitment and Retention (DRR) Statewide Recruitment Campaign, the Adoption Call to Action, the Permanency Innovation Initiative, and other efforts. These initiatives create opportunities and strategies for achieving timely permanence. North Carolina also makes funds available to support children with complicated psychological and medical needs (including HIV) and to identify adoptive placements out of state.

The descriptions below offer more information on permanency-related initiatives and programs available across the state.

**Court Collaboration.** To promote permanency the NC Division of Social Services (NCDSS) collaborates with the court system through an interagency collaborative. Collaborative participants include representa-

tives from NC's Court Improvement Program, NCDSS, the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Guardian ad Litem Program, the Indigent Defense Fund, the University of North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction, and county child welfare agencies.

**Prevention Collaboration.** North Carolina will begin implementing the federal Family First Prevention Services Act in 2021. This law allows states to cover costs related to foster care and adoption assistance. If they wish, states may also extend federal (IV-E) reimbursement to cover certain expenditures and services related to preventing foster care placements. This includes reimbursement for evidence-based mental health, substance abuse, and parenting services to keep children safely with their families. Family First provisions are intended to strengthen families, prevent foster care placements, and limit the time children spend in foster care.

**Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program.** This program, which is also called KinGAP, offers financial assistance and Medicaid for youth who are ages 14 to 18 and placed with licensed kinship caregivers or foster parents who are committed to being a permanent home for the youth.

**Adoption Promotion Program Fund.** This program helps identify permanent adoptive homes for hard to place children and youth with special needs in the foster care system. This is achieved through a collaboration between public and contracted private child-placing agencies. Participating agencies develop adoption resources and support families and youth through the adoption process. Examples of funded activities include recruiting and developing adoptive families to meet the needs of youth needing adoptive homes, providing adoption readiness activities for youth and families, and providing adoption competency training to staff.

**Post Adoption Support Services (PASS).** These services help ensure the permanency and well-being of adoptees and their families. PASS are voluntary and available to all adoptees in North Carolina—regardless of the age of the adoptee or the type of adoption. Services can include but are not limited to building a network of support, case management and service planning, education and training, advocacy services, counseling services, crisis intervention, and support groups for parents and adoptees. PASS also provides education, outreach, and support to families at risk of or experiencing an illegal custody transfer.

**Supplement for Children Exposed to HIV.**



*North Carolina is committed to ensuring every child and youth grows up in a family that can provide them with the love, hope, and stability they deserve.*

North Carolina provides supplemental board payments for children served by the foster care program and supplemental adoption assistance payments for adopted children who were diagnosed as having been prenatally exposed to HIV or who develop symptoms of HIV/AIDS in foster care. Supplemental payments for HIV positive children may be made to foster/adoptive families, group homes, or childcare institutions licensed by the NC Division of Social Services.

**Foster Care 18 to 21 Program.** The NC Division of Social Services collaborated with diverse partners and the General Assembly to afford the opportunity for youth who meet program requirements to continue foster care services until they reach the age of 21. State statute also allows adoption assistance payments to continue until a youth reaches the age of 21 if the youth was adopted at age 16 or 17.

**Permanency Roundtables.** Achieving permanency through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or another lifelong, supportive relationship is one way to mitigate the negative outcomes that are probable for youth who would otherwise “age out” without permanent families or positive connections. By offering a structured, targeted approach, Permanency Roundtables can restore hope for these youth and increase the probability of their achieving permanency.

**Purchase of Service Fees (Set Per Child Rate).** State funds are available to the county department of social services, if certain guidelines are met, for adoption services from specialized out-of-state providers when adoption resources are not available in state for special needs children.

*Response by the NC Division of Social Services. Have a question about foster care or adoption you'd like answered in "A Reader Asks"? Send it to us using the contact information found on page 5 in this issue.*

# Writing Contest

First Prize: \$100 • Second Prize: \$50 • Third Prize: \$25

If you are or were enrolled in North Carolina's Foster Care 18 to 21 program, please send us a response to the following questions:



**How have you benefited from participating in Foster Care 18 to 21? What advice do you have for someone considering this program?**

*(Responses should be 200 words or less.)*

**DEADLINE: Feb 2, 2021**

E-mail submissions to [jdmcmaho@unc.edu](mailto: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 v25 n1

1. On what website can you take the free online course "Guardianship, Pathway to Permanence"?
2. Name three things resource parents can do to build the protective factor of social connections during the pandemic.
3. What do the five letters in the acronym SCOOP stand for?
4. Name two of LeAnn McKoy's suggestions for managing the approaching holidays.
5. Do you agree with Amy Huntsman's take on telehealth? Why or why not?
6. Name six of the creative methods GAL volunteers have used to connect with children since the arrival of COVID-19.
7. What has the NC DHHS done to ensure licensing of foster homes could continue during the pandemic?
8. Name the six resources especially relevant to the pandemic that NC LINKS youth should know about.
9. According to Glenda Clare, what are some common challenges faced by kinship caregivers during the pandemic?
10. Name at least four things parents can do to support children's emotional well-being during the pandemic.

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# National Adoption Month

November 2020



Engage Youth: Listen and Learn

November is National Adoption month! We use this month to honor families who have adopted and raise awareness about the urgent need for adoptive families for children and youth in foster care.

When reunification is not possible and an alternative plan is required, adoption is one way to achieve permanency. Right now there are hundreds of children and youth waiting to be adopted from foster care in North Carolina.

This year North Carolina families are especially encouraged to share their hearts and homes with older youth who are waiting to be adopted and at risk of aging out of foster care.

## How can you encourage others to learn about adoption?

- Ask your local department of social services how you can help
- Participate in local and state events celebrating adoption
- Share books, articles, blogs, and other materials related to adoption
- Spread awareness through social media—for example, post videos about adoption or information about orientations for people interested in adoption
- Watch adoption-related movies with family, friends, and others
- Give money to or volunteer for organizations that support adoptions
- Send letters to attorneys, social workers, judges, resource parents, and others thanking them for being involved in the adoption process
- Retell your child's adoption story to them and celebrate their heritage

fostering perspectives

Family and Children's Resource Program  
UNC School of Social Work  
100 Europa Dr., Suite 571 – CB# 5220  
Chapel Hill, NC 27517

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