

fostering perspectives

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The Power of Supportive Caregivers and Professionals

There are countless ways in which resource parents and child welfare professionals can support youth in care. Providing thoughtful and intentional support should always be one of the top priorities of individuals facilitating the growth and development of children and youth who have experienced trauma. Because every child and youth is unique and their experiences vary, there is no one formula or path that will meet the needs of everyone.

As a caregiver or child welfare professional, it's your responsibility to find the best way to support the children and youth you are working alongside. Support can be something as small as spending quality time together, or as big as connecting children and youth with much needed resources. Either way, we know that when children and youth are surrounded by supportive adults meeting their individualized needs, their outcomes improve.

In this issue of *Fostering Perspectives*, our contributors wanted to share what they do support children and youth every day. You will read contributions for resource parents, professionals, and those with lived experience as they discuss supporting mental health, building support networks, supporting children and youth with incarcerated parents, and much more. We hope you find it helpful.

Talking Mental Health: Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment for Foster Parents

Being in foster care can evoke a range of complex emotions for children, each with unique experiences. These emotions can significantly impact their mental well-being, from abandonment to confusion to happiness. As someone who has worked with children in the foster care system since 2012, I have witnessed firsthand their challenges and the resilience they demonstrate. I saw brave children who faced many obstacles and overcame many barriers. Even now, as I provide psychotherapy to children in foster care, many leave my office only to put a "mask" back on, hiding their hurt and pain in fear of their peers using it as a weakness. A mask can also hide feelings of happiness and love from their foster parents, for they do not know how long the relationship will last. The impermanence within the foster care system can be taxing on one's mental health. However, it is crucial for foster parents to understand the importance of creating an environment that prioritizes mental health.

Why is it important for foster parents to create an environment that speaks to mental health?

Just as physical safety is essential, emotional

safety is vital in supporting children's well-being. As a psychotherapist working closely with foster parents, I emphasize the need for vulnerability and openness within the home environment.

I've had foster parents tell me that people rarely think about how hard it is for them—to be open and connect with a child, only for them to leave one day without any guarantee of future contact. Addressing topics such as pain and impermanence—the change involved—and most importantly healing, we create an atmosphere that acknowledges mental health concerns.

Creating an environment inviting enough for children to feel vulnerable requires fostering vulnerability within ourselves as foster parents. It is important for foster parents to have their own therapist so the child knows that the foster parent attends therapy just like them. Too often, a foster child's environment isn't welcoming to mental health care, so like anything else you don't see in your environment, you most likely will not do it yourself.

Foster parents possess more influence than they may realize when it comes to shaping their child's well-being. While professional therapy is valuable,

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by Dr. Anthony Andrews

fostering open communication through dedicated "Power Hour" sessions can work wonders for building trust and understanding between parent and child.

"Power Hour" is a dedicated time that foster parents set aside each day for the child to talk about whatever feelings, likes, dislikes, and worries they may have. Whether or not they use it daily is not the concern; the important part is that the space is consistently available for them. Remember, when youth are removed from their homes it's a chaotic event for everyone. It may feel hard to receive answers to all of your questions, but still necessary to have as much information as possible to make informed decisions. Having key information upfront can decrease the possibility of later disruption. It's very unfortunate, but there are times when youth are moved from a foster or kinship home due to a scheduling or childcare issue that could have been

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Talking Mental Health

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resolved prior to the youth moving in.

Why is it important for foster parents to create an environment that speaks to mental health?

Many argue that our habits are directly associated with our mental health. You may be familiar with the phrase; you are what you eat. Unhealthy foods can make us feel sluggish, providing us with little energy, which could exacerbate negative mental health symptoms. Exercising is also a habit that leads to positive mental health.

As parents, it's important that your child sees you implementing healthy habits—seeing you increase their chances of engaging in the same activities. Some examples include:

- Encourage physical activities like walking or cycling together as a family.
- Model healthy eating habits by incorporating nutritious meals into daily routines.
- Engage in therapeutic activities such as reading or journaling together.
- Share your experiences of seeking therapy or counseling, normalizing the idea, and reducing stigma.

A good time to ask your child about their day would be around a dinner table every night or on a nice walk while soaking up some vitamin D. I cook dinner for my children every evening, and we eat at the dinner table. Usually before dinner we walk around the neighborhood as a family and discuss our day. Most evenings, my kids see me reading a book and after I'm done, they ask if they can read a book to me. If I drink more water, they want to drink

water. They ask for more veggies on their plate if they see me munch down my veggies. I tell them I speak with a counselor to discuss my feelings, and guess what? My daughter was willing to speak with her very own counselor at the young age of four. Focusing on our habits will allow our children to learn positive habits that can be used as coping skills even when we aren't around.

Why is it important for foster parents to create an environment that speaks to mental health?

When I work with foster parents, one of their biggest concerns is whether they're doing a good job. They question themselves on being a good fit for a kid or just being a good foster parent. These intrusive thoughts, negative thinking, and worry can change how our children think about themselves. I have also been a believer in energy, and children and adolescents are some of the best readers of it. They can read confidence or the lack thereof. It is important for them to see you make and handle those mistakes without panicking or giving up. Too often, they go into new homes thinking that they must be perfect or they will be relocated, so many self-sabotage the relationship or placement to beat you to the punch.

Giving grace is one of our biggest parenting tools—for our children and ourselves. I suggest to many of the families that I work with to utilize an acronym that I use with families called FANOS.

F-Feelings: What have you been feeling this week?

A-Affirmation: Something that each of you has done well recently.

N-Needs: What do you need from me?

O-Ownership: What can I take ownership of and do better?

S-Strengths: Name an area that we're strong in.

Try this activity weekly. One day, you will no longer need the acronym, and it will come naturally. But if it doesn't, that's okay. You're not perfect, and that's perfectly fine.

Creating a nurturing environment that prioritizes mental health is crucial for foster parents in supporting the well-being of the children in their care. By fostering open communication through "Power Hour" sessions, modeling healthy habits, embracing imperfection while utilizing tools like FANOS to encourage self-reflection and growth within the family unit, foster parents can provide a foundation for positive mental health outcomes. Remember that you are not expected to be perfect. But, through your genuine efforts and commitment to creating a safe and supportive environment, you can make a lasting impact on a child's life. During this time you can support the team by giving suggestions about treatment services, sharing about the youth's preferences, and offering to speak to the new caregiver. Resource parents need to show youth they have their best interest in mind, and that starts from day one, and doesn't have an end date.

Dr. Andrews is a licensed professional counselor and certified rehabilitation counselor (CRC) based out of Charlotte who specializes in trauma. Dr. Andrews serves individuals, couples, and families—working closely with children and adolescents, addressing various forms of trauma.

Working in Partnership to Support Shared Parenting



Amy Huntsman

Living in a strange home is hard.

Trusting your little person with someone you just met is hard. Meeting a new family and trying to instill some sense of safety is hard too.

Shared Parenting isn't for the faint of heart. It's some of the most difficult work to do for a child, but also the most rewarding and beneficial. Resource and biological parents together are a winning team, and this team sometimes needs a social worker to be the coach. Partnership in shared parenting can mean the difference in a child feeling a sense of security during a period of crisis versus continuous trauma. There are so many little things that can be done to support Shared Parenting. I wanted to share some that I've seen be successful in my professional experience. I hope you're able to incorporate these into your

own shared parenting practices:

Have a meet and greet with both sets of parents with the social worker present. Try to set a casual yet meaningful tone. Share some stories, exchange child information, and set expectations for future meetings.

Have the child observe resource and biological parents talking together and sharing current information about the child's progress and needs. Children and youth seeing all the parents on the same page will increase their sense of safety and structure.

Shared Parenting can be a learning experience. Everyone has something new to learn, and parents can learn from one another. A biological parent can share the best way to soothe their fussy infant in the same way a resource parent can share tips of the trade on effective discipline.

Long term benefits to Shared Parenting are numerous. Children deserve more than a photo or a memory of a chunk of their life. Positive partnership between parents allows for ongoing contact, creating a relationship that can be supportive to the child

and family throughout a lifetime.

Always work with the end goal in mind of the child being stable and happy. Decisions and communications should always be made with the youth in mind and not solely the opinions and preferences of the resource or biological parents.

Shared Parenting is an ongoing partnership and setting a routine and map for where you want to go is important. A routine will help with the child's emotional security and assist adults in keeping fair boundaries. Some ideas might include: setting aside a few minutes after visitation to catch up, having a phone call or weekly email, sharing a journal back and forth with updates, challenges, and daily joys. Use your social worker and Child and Family Team as a guide to what is best practice for your child and situation.

Amy Huntsman is the Foster Home Licensing Supervisor with the Buncombe County Department of Social Services

Supporting Children and Youth during the Holiday Season



Melissa Russell

The holiday season is an exciting time. Decorating, parties, gifts to purchase and wrap, and just an overall sense of joy. However, for children in care, this time can be confusing and bring about unwanted emotions. Over my seven years as a foster parent, I learned that navigating this time of year can be challenging, but the smiles and excitement from the children were the greatest rewards.

One of the biggest lessons I learned as a foster parent around the holidays was to be flexible and adapt to the situation. One of the children that we cared for during the holidays was ordered to have a visit on Christmas Day. I was frustrated at first. It felt like our own traditions were being pushed aside, and I didn't like it. But then I saw the looks on the birth parents faces when they saw their baby on his first Christmas and my frustrations dissolved. It wasn't about me in that moment. It was about allowing this family to have a bit of normalcy in a time of chaos.

Normalcy, or as close to normal as can be cre-

ated, is important for children in care. One thing we always tried to do was ask our children or their birth family about traditions that were important to them and incorporate them into our own traditions. It could be as simple as a favorite food, movie, letting the child write letters to Santa, or singing songs together.

The holidays can also serve as an opportunity to provide updates on the child in a less formal setting. I would often gift birth parents a framed photo collage of the child made by the child. If the child was old enough, I would take them shopping for a more personalized gift. My hopes were that this would provide motivation and give that birth parent something that they could hold onto during times apart. It also gave the child some control over something in a situation where they have so little.

My natural reaction was to always go overboard and do as much or give as much as I could during the holidays. It was easy to do, and, in some ways, I really think it was okay. Building gingerbread houses, making holiday cookies, hot chocolate from Starbucks, riding around to look at Christmas lights, leaving out milk and cookies for Santa, watching holiday movies, and all the other moments that can help create positive core memories for children.

Yet, sometimes these moments can evoke emotions and confusion in children which could result in increased behaviors. Just remain patient and remember to not take the behaviors personally. Give them a safe space to talk about their emotions or provide other therapeutic outlets. Journaling for those that are older can be helpful. For the younger children, we would have nightly dance parties. It allowed the children a chance to release some of their emotions that they didn't understand or were about to process.

At all times, keeping the child and what is in their best interest is what we're all striving to do, and at the holidays this is especially important. It's so easy to get wrapped up in the hustle and bustle, but watching for their cues and taking the time out to make some special allowances for them can go a long way to provide normalcy for them and support the whole family.

Melissa Russell was a foster parent for seven years and now serves on the NC State Child Welfare Family Advisory Council. She is the parent of two children adopted from foster care. She resides with her family in Forsyth County. Melissa works as a behavioral health nurse and has a passion for mental healthcare.

Building a Network of Support for Youth in Care from Someone with Lived Experience

Developing a support network is a key element to successfully transition into adulthood for any youth who has had to experience substitute care, like me.

My ideal support network would consist of people in my life that help me achieve my personal and professional goals. After entering care and instantly losing access to any form of support I may have had, identifying who would fill those shoes became challenging. My daily frustrations came from the lack of stability in my life and having the constant feeling of rejection by the ones I believed loved me the most. Although I am aware now, at the time, I could not realize that my anger and delinquent behaviors were adjacent to my abandonment issues.

Even with my long list of trauma responses, I would like to say, I still had people who never gave up on me. My support system included God, my social worker, foster parent, GAL, judge, and even my school principal. The determination for them to establish my trust went a very long way within our relationships. Like some other youth, I felt that I was not deserving of love, or the time invested into understanding who I truly was.

There will be young people that may give you a hard time, but time and time again, keep showing them that they matter.

Depending on each young person, the expectation to be met with hostility or disappointment

when they make a mistake is normal to them, but the willingness to show up with patience and understanding makes all the difference. If you took the time to think about the most traumatic thing in your life, the people who were there for you the most are the ones you would never forget. Although the memories of pain were the easiest to think of, the people who made me feel safe and prioritized quickly became the people who turned into my support system.

Lashing out and misbehaving are not signs that we are bad kids who need to be punished, yet they are signs that we need compassion and guidance to find more productive ways to deal with our traumatic situations. When it was time for me to exit from the child welfare system, there was a high demand for me to have connections with supportive adults. Even when I didn't make the best decisions, I still found myself being able to have people who could provide support and help me access necessary resources and services. There are youth who age out of the child welfare system and have no clue where to start. They are faced with limited connections or without the support of positive, caring adults resulting in the increased risk of homelessness, abuse, lack of education, and employment.

I often witness those same struggles amongst some of my peers who couldn't overcome the conflicts of being in foster care. Fortunately, my team understood that I needed to know what opportunities foster care had for my life. I had the consistent push



Lyrika Evans

of motivation for me to graduate high school and take the necessary steps to further my education. Along this journey, I encountered many obstacles that most of us may face as we transition out of care, but the supportive network I gained carried me over each barrier. Even long after care, I have my former foster parents who I now call mom and dad, old social workers who are only one phone call away, and a support system who never stopped believing in me. Thanks to them, I am soon to be a college graduate and I have the firmness of purpose to strive for the things that used to be the unthinkable.

Lyrika Evans is a NC LINKS Administrative Assistant with the NC Department of Health and Human Services Division of Social Services. She also advocates for youth in care by partnering with groups like SAYSO and has lived experience in the foster care system.

Challenges of Raising My Teenage Siblings: A Journey of Love and Resilience

by Jamie Barricelli

Raising teenage siblings can be an incredibly challenging task, especially when circumstances force you to transition from a sister role to that of a parent.

As a 23-year-old, I found myself facing this responsibility. I had to drop out of school to ensure my siblings had a stable and nurturing environment. I want to share the difficulties I encountered, including helping my siblings cope with the childhood trauma inflicted by our mother's mental, emotional, and physical abuse. However, through the support of a kinship foster care program and a commitment to open communication, emotional well-being, and positive thinking, my family has managed to overcome these challenges and build a new life.

The transition from being a sister to assuming a parental role was undoubtedly one of the most significant challenges I faced. Suddenly, I found myself responsible for making crucial decisions, providing financial support, and ensuring my siblings' overall well-being. This shift required me to mature rapidly and adapt to the demands of parenthood at a young age. Balancing my own personal growth and aspirations with the needs of my siblings became a delicate juggling act. Not a day came without sacrifices. In order to provide a stable environment for my siblings, I made the difficult decision to drop out of school. This sacrifice was necessary to ensure that we had enough financial resources to meet our basic needs. While it was disheartening to put my education on hold, the well-being of my siblings took precedence.

Despite the challenges, I remained determined to create a better future for all of us. One of the

most significant hurdles we faced as a family was helping my siblings heal from the childhood trauma inflicted by our mother's abusive behavior. The scars left by mental, emotional, and physical abuse were deep, and it required immense patience, understanding, and professional guidance to navigate through the healing process.

The kinship foster care program with Boys and Girls Homes of North Carolina played a crucial role in providing us with the necessary resources and support to address these issues effectively. The program along with its staff members proved to be a lifeline for my family. Through this program, we received education and guidance on understanding and addressing the mental and emotional struggles my siblings and even myself were experiencing.

The program connected us with "third-party" professionals who provided invaluable assistance in dealing with the emotional challenges that were often overwhelming for me as an older sibling. It helped to have someone who was an outside third-party perspective to look in from the outside because while most siblings fight and argue - imagine how hard it was during this difficult transition while everyone established their new family roles. The support we received helped us build a solid foundation for healing and growth.

Today, I am proud to say that my siblings and I have come a long way. With the help of the kinship foster care program, I was able to purchase a house where my siblings can grow up in a safe and nur-



(L to R) Jamie, her partner and her siblings

turing environment. Our home is centered around open communication, healthy emotional expression, and fostering positive thinking. These values have become the pillars of our family's resilience and growth.

To those in a similar situation- please know there is help out there. Thousands of children are raised by family members other than their parents and while it may be a sudden change for some, remind yourself to take it one day at a time.

Reach out to people for help (school counselors, foster care programs, therapists) and talk to your family members to find ways to create a life that works for everyone. Raising teenage siblings is undoubtedly a challenging journey, particularly for an older sibling who is still navigating their own path in life. However, with determination, support, and access to resources like the kinship foster care program, it is possible to overcome these challenges and create a new life filled with love, healing, and growth. My experience has taught me the importance of resilience, empathy, and the power of a supportive community in overcoming adversity.

Keeping Siblings Together as a Kinship Caregiver

I recently spoke with Eriq Partin, who is licensed with Methodist Home for Children, about how he has kept his siblings together as a kinship caregiver. He was open and honest in a way that shows just how much of a challenge every day as a kinship caregiver could be. Yet, by the end of our conversation, I truly impressed by everything Eriq and his siblings have accomplished.

Eriq is 35, single, and is a bus driver. He began school in October 2023 and is working towards owning his own funeral home, a business he wants to be able to pass on to his siblings. After all, there are five of them that Eriq cares for, all under the age of



Eriq Partin

12. At one point during our call he had to pause a few times to make sure his siblings were using the right kind of milk with their cereal. Even through the phone, I could tell he had eyes in the back of his head.

Eriq grew up in a military family and lived all up and down the east coast. Unfortunately, like in many families, substance misuse became an issue with his parents. He had already adopted his four year old sister several years ago, so he had experience caring for his siblings. While caring for his sister, he still remembers the day he was called about

his other four siblings. He recalls his phone ringing from an unfamiliar number several times before he picked it up. It was the Division of Social Services. Eriq's four other siblings were coming into care.

His first thought? "Heck no," he told me. But that no quickly turned into a yes because Eriq knew he had to keep his siblings together and with family.

"Do you want me to tell you the truth? It's hard."

He knew his life was about to change forever. He didn't feel prepared and knew providing care for his siblings would be a challenge. It had already complicated and damaged some family relationships as some of his family resented him for "taking the kids."

Eriq is in the process of adopting all of his siblings

and is looking forward to the finalization so he can ask more people to assist him with one of his biggest challenges, childcare. Respite and childcare was a theme Eriq brought up many times. He shared that caring for all of his siblings by himself has been taxing on his mental health, and any help or support is appreciated.

Even with all of the challenges, Eriq knows his top priority is to keep his siblings together and

with family. "They've always been together. It's what they know. They are a security blanket for one another. They love each other and they're all really close."

Eriq and his siblings get through by staying busy. He has them involved in sports and activities and has many hopes for them. "I want them to feel loved and contribute to society. I want them to be whatever they want to be."

I wrapped up our conversation asking Eriq what he's doing for himself and if he has any advice for anyone considering kinship care. Eriq told me he's making more time for himself and is excited about going back to school. He also proudly told me he has recently started going to therapy, a place where he can process all the changes he has been through. His final words for readers were: "It's really hard work so you need to really think about it before you say yes. Yet, I can still say it's all been a blessing."

Creating Supportive Homes for LGBTQ+ Youth

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth are over-represented in the foster care system. This means that the percentage of youth in foster care who are LGBTQ+ identified is larger than the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in the general youth population. LGBTQ+ youth in foster care also face disparities like differences in experiences in care or treatment by the system.

LGBTQ+ youth enter the foster care system for many of the same reasons as non-LGBTQ+ youth: abuse, neglect, and parental substance misuse. Many LGBTQ+ youth have the added layer of trauma that comes with being rejected or mistreated because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. More than 30% of youth in out of home care identify as LGBTQ+.

An LGBTQ+ affirming home is one where resource parents welcome all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) children and youth into their home and encourage them to live authentically in all aspects of family life. It is also a place where all children and youth are treated with respect and dignity, and resource parents diligently work to meet their children's specific needs.

As an Affirming Resource Parent, you will:

Encourage your LGBTQ+ child to speak openly and honestly about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with family.

Welcome your LGBTQ+ child to participate in all family activities authentically.

Invite your LGBTQ+ child's friends and/or partner(s) to your home and to family events and activities.

Work with community groups (such as open and affirming faith and/or social community groups) to become supportive of LGBTQ+ family members.

PFLAG – parents and friends of lesbians and gays is an excellent resource you can search by zip code <https://pflag.org/findachapter/>.

In addition to encouraging LGBTQ+ children and youth to live openly, as an affirming resource parent, you can provide respect and dignity by:

Treating your LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ children equally. Use the pronouns the child or teen uses to identify themselves.

Requiring other family members, including extended family members and close friends, to respect your LGBTQ+ child.

Expressing affirmation and acceptance when your child tells you or when you learn that your child is LGBTQ+.

Believing your child can have a happy future as an LGBTQ+ adult.

Resource Parents and supportive caseworkers, working to meet the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth for children and young people that identify as LGBTQ+, should understand that "coming out" is a complex process of understanding, accepting, and valuing one's identity. This development includes both exploring one's identity and sharing that identity with family members, friends, and loved ones. Many LGBTQ+ youth begin to understand their sexual orientation or gender identity during adolescence. Most grow up with the awareness that they are somehow different, and with some unclear ideas about what that difference might be.

As an affirming resource parent or supportive caseworker, you can meet LGBTQ+ youth needs by:

Talking with your LGBTQ+ child about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Supporting your child's LGBTQ+ identity even though you may feel uncertain.

Advocating for your LGBTQ+ child when they

are mistreated because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Seeking assistance as needed to advocate for your LGBTQ+ child with respect to school bullying, accessing competent medical/mental healthcare, identifying support groups, etc.

Bringing your family to LGBTQ+ organizations and/or events.

Connecting your LGBTQ+ child with an LGBTQ+ adult role model to show them positive options for the future.

Supporting your child's gender expression, or the way they communicate their deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither. You can find additional information at <https://www.hrc.org/resources/just-as-they-are>.

We at SYNC – Sexual Health for Youth in Care, are advocates and allies for LGBTQ+ youth and those who support them as resource parents and caregiving professionals. If you need additional support and resources, please reach out to the SYNC team at <https://healthsync.org/> or visit the page for LGBTQ+ resources for teens in care. You can also reach out to me personally at jolson@chsnc.org.

Jeanne Irwin-Olson, M.Ed is a seasoned health education professional with over 27 years of experience in the field of public health education. Her primary focus and passion is improving the sexual health education of and access to sexual health care for teens and young adults. Jeanne has worked for the Children's Home Society since April 2022, most recently in the role of SYNC Education Trainer for the Central Region of North Carolina.



Jeanne Irwin-Olson

Benefits of Kinship Care

A systematic review of more than 100 studies found that when compared with children in non-relative foster care, children in kinship care have:

- More stability in placement and greater likelihood of remaining with siblings.
- Lower rates of both re-abuse and institutional abuse.
- Better behavioral and mental health, exhibited by fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors, better adaptive behaviors, fewer psychiatric disorders, and better emotional health.
- Higher likelihood of achieving permanency through guardianship with their relative caregivers to maintain life-long connections with their family if they are unable to safely return home.

Professional Parenting and Innovation in Foster Care



Meredith Martin

How did you become a parent for the first time?

For me, I remember finding out I was pregnant with identical twin girls during an ultrasound and being completely overwhelmed by the news. I think most people feel overwhelmed when they become

parents for the first time.

While I was pregnant, I was a program director at a non-profit working with young parents. The goal of our program was to support people who became parents in their teenage years so that they could raise their children independently. When it became physically clear that I was also becoming a parent, I shared with my clients that I was pregnant with twins. I will never forget the reaction of one of my clients who had recently given birth to identical twin girls herself: "Oh, I'm so sorry. That is awful!" This was a very different response from the majority of folks in my personal and professional communities who had given me well wishes. I was double this client's age and had so many supports in place; and I was still overwhelmed! My client absolutely loved her children and was an incredible mom. She just knew how difficult life had become for her since the birth of her girls and she intended to give me a clear picture of what I might be walking through in the coming months and years.

It is not fair, but the reality of the situation is that my experience as a new parent was vastly different from my client's. I had a supportive spouse; the father of her children was incarcerated. I had financial stability; she was incredibly reliant on government assistance. I had a supportive family who could help coach me through the challenges of parenthood; she had an ambivalent relationship with her family of origin and was trying to figure out how to parent while she had experienced abuse and neglect herself as a child.

I currently serve as Vice President of Programs at Crossnore Communities for Children. At Crossnore, we are currently innovating in foster care through our new Bridging Families© program. Bridging

Families© uses professional foster parents, Bridge Parents, who come alongside parents like my client from years ago, and support them - bridge the gaps - so that they can be reunified with their children. We fundamentally believe that children belong back home, whenever possible and we are fiercely committed to doing all we can to support families in making this happen.

Bridge Parents coach parents who have been separated from their children on the many things we need to know to be successful parents. Bridge Parents are, by definition, not a permanent placement option. The entire program is designed to do everything in our power to prepare parents for reunification.

One of our Bridge Parents, Mike Raymer, describes the program like this: "At first, we model parenting and help the kids get used to a home with structure. We welcome the parents of origin into the home and let them observe how we run things, answer their questions and let them have positive interactions with their kids in a household that functions smoothly. As the families progress in the program we give mom and dad more autonomy and let them practice the skills they are learning. We let them fail when they need to and process offline with them when the kids are at school how they could have redone anything that didn't go well. Eventually we sit back and let them run the house and we are able to praise them for the progress they have made. Reunification is the final step and we support them at that phase too!"

Mike and his wife Penny, like all our Bridge Parents, work with a team of other professionals who wrap support around families separated by foster care. A Bridging Families© team includes Bridge Parents, a case manager, a therapist and a team supervisor. The teams work tirelessly to meet the families where they are. Our goal is to provide as much on site support as possible.

Our case managers help families navigate through court and DSS requirements, manage communication with all entities involved, help them find jobs, assist with housing, and navigate systems that can be confusing to all of us! The cli-

nicians on the team coach the families and staff in use of Triple P, Trust Based Relational Intervention, and see that the children's parents clinical needs are met through family and individual therapy which often happens in their home.

The families we work with come from many counties throughout North Carolina and each has their own challenges and opportunities. Bridging Families© teams enjoy tailoring the program to meet each family's unique needs. We are grateful that Bridge Parents' full time job is to serve in this program. Recently, one of our Bridge Parents, Shirlee Severs, went with a biological dad to a back to school night. Shirlee's first career was as an educator and she was able to help the biological dad in her home understand all the nuances parents have to navigate in the school systems in order for his kids to have a successful return to school. As my own children have progressed in school, there are many times when I could have used a Shirlee to help me navigate these systems!

Bridging Families© is grounded in supporting parents. Since the beginning of our pilot of this program in September 2021, Crossnore has expanded Bridging Families© to ten homes across western NC. We have learned so much from our families and staff during this pilot phase and have high hopes for how Bridging Families© can support transformation in foster care so that supportive caregivers can give even more of their time and energy towards family reunification.

Our goal for the program is that all parents have the support they need, the support I had, when they become parents. Parenting can be overwhelming; none of us can or should have to do this alone.

Meredith Martin, MDiv, MSW, LCSW is the Vice President of Programs with Crossnore Communities for Children

Crossnore is currently accepting referrals for our Bridging Families© homes. Referrals can be sent to referrals@crossnore.org. We are hiring for various open positions in Bridging Families© - current vacancies can be found via this QR code:



To learn more about becoming a Guardian Ad Litem scan the QR Code here:



How to Include Youth Voice in Permanency Planning

- 1** Use their strengths to guide their participation
- 2** Empower youth to take part in decision-making.
- 3** Give youth time to consider their options.

National Adoption Month
childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth/

Messages from Foster Family Alliance of NC



Gaile Osborne

My Fellow Foster Parents of North Carolina,

I want to take a moment to express my heartfelt admiration and appreciation for the incredible role you have taken on as a foster parent. Your dedication, compassion, and selflessness are making a pro-

found difference in the lives of the children in your care.

Fostering is not just a commitment; it's a calling. It takes an incredible person to open their heart and home to children who may have experienced difficult and traumatic circumstances. You have stepped up to provide stability, love, and a nurturing environment for these children, and that is truly commendable.

The impact you are making on these young lives is immeasurable. You are giving them a chance to

heal, to grow, and to thrive in a safe and loving environment. Your patience and understanding are helping them rebuild their trust and self-esteem, and your support is shaping their future in the most positive way.

I want you to know that you are not alone on this journey. The challenges of foster parenting can be demanding, and it's perfectly okay to seek support and resources when needed. We are here for you at Foster Family Alliance to advocate, lead support groups, and provide fellow foster parents who can provide guidance, encouragement, and a listening ear whenever you need it.

Please remember to take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. It's easy to put the needs of others ahead of your own, but self-care is essential to continue being the best possible caregiver. Don't hesitate to take breaks and seek respite care to recharge your energy.


Your commitment to fostering is a beautiful

example of the power of love and compassion. You are creating a brighter future for these children, and your kindness and generosity are making the world a better place. Your actions inspire others and serve as a reminder of the importance of giving back to our community.


If ever you feel overwhelmed or in need of support, know that we are here for you, we care deeply about you, and we are willing to assist you on this journey. Your efforts are valued, and your contributions to the lives of these children are immeasurable.

In closing, I want to express my deepest gratitude and admiration for your dedication as a foster parent. You are a shining example of the difference one person can make in the world, and your love is creating a brighter future for those in your care.

With heartfelt appreciation and support, standing in the trenches with you.



FFA-NC is looking for volunteers for committees, the Board of Directors, and other areas. Please fill out our application, which you can find here: <https://www.ffa-nc.org/membership> or by scanning the qr code:




As the director of Foster Family Alliance of NC, I hear many statewide scenarios regarding resource families. I hear the amazing, the difficult, and everything in between. Some of the things I hear I am ecstatic with and want to just get in my car and hug the resource parent. On the other hand, there are things that infuriate me. Walk with me through some intense thoughts to consider.

I have been struggling for months, hearing stories where foster parents are literally fighting for adoptions, hiring attorneys, and delaying or even trying to stop reunification of children in their care. I have seen them testify in Raleigh to committees looking for legislation change, get on social media and share a story that isn't theirs to share and ultimately, claim they are better than the family of origin. I have wrestled with these words, and I have decided I am going to speak from my heart. The children in our homes, while in child welfare custody, are not "our" children.

We should not engage in anger and hurt towards their mother and/or father. When you do, you are attacking the very core of a child, the people that made and gave birth to the child. No matter what the parents have done or not done, they are still the parent, and a child will always love them. If you feel the need to attack, humiliate and simply rip their parents apart, you are not safe to be parenting the very child you are fighting for. In fact, you are more emotionally unsafe than the situation from which they were removed.


Your actions are in danger of ripping apart the family and creating additional stress, especially for the child. Even if you adopt, even if you get guardianship, you will always be a substitute caregiver. You can't change DNA; you can't change the bond/connection on a cellular level. There is a high probability that the parent you are targeting was also a child with lived experience in child welfare custody. I imagine, in a different time, you would have supported them as well. Think about the potential trauma you may be creating. Don't use your status or circumstances to further destroy the parents or the children. In the end, it's not about you being a better parent or providing a better life. It's about a family-first environment where a child can be reunified and loved by the very one(s) they came from. In the end, you should be co-parenting, lifting up the mother and/or father, cheering them on and sharing every moment you can to get them back on track to positively parenting their child. And if they can't reunify, then provide opportunities to keep that bond alive while you are substituting. And when you CANNOT make this happen, think about stepping away from this child and this situation. It may be time to take a break and reevaluate your role as a foster parent.



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

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

Join the fosteringNC.org email list, to sign up to receive news and updates scan this qr code:



Writing Contest



In the most recent Fostering Perspectives writing contest we gave young people in foster care the following prompt: **"We want all young people in foster care to feel safe in their foster home. When you feel safe in your home it allows you to feel happier, healthier, do better in school, and reach out for help when you need it. What do your foster parents do to help you feel safe?"** Here's what they had to say.

Ronnie, age 15

I felt scared and nervous when I moved in with my foster family at the age of 10, especially since my birthday was only two weeks away. My stepmother had warned me that they might not treat me as kindly as she would. However, the reality was quite different from what she had said. I have been living with my foster parents for nearly five years and have enjoyed every bit of it. Their kindness made me feel much safer. They allowed me to sleep with their dogs and provided night lights because I was afraid of the dark. They also reassured me that I would have enough food to eat and a roof over my head. I have learned a lot during this time and have had the opportunity to experience things that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to. Now that I am 15, I have a better understanding of what a true family looks like and what it means to be loved. I have loved every little bit of being with my family.

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



Aliyah, age 11

So, when I first went into foster care, I feared having to leave my mother behind. But how my foster mom helps me was by mediate when I was sad, mad, upset but I got through it. I would need to talk it out. My foster mom fed me and took good care of me. She treated me like her own daughter. It is hard sometimes graduating the 5th grade and going to middle school. Without my mom there with me. But I will always have my foster mom. Being in foster care for 2 years is hard for me. It hurts a lot like you feel your heart cracking because you miss them so much. But I must get through it me looking back seeing how far I have come, and I don't want to look back and start the process over of me going home. But I couldn't imagine someone else in a much worse position than me. I'm sure it hurts them, and it is hard.

ALIYAH RECEIVED \$50 FOR TAKING SECOND PRIZE.



Kendall, age 15

Feeling safe is really hard when I am not with my mom, who would tuck me in at night. My dad, who would let me crawl in bed with him after a nightmare. My sisters, that I knew would always be there for me through everything. Even though I don't have that type of safety anymore I still feel safe. My foster parent helps me feel safe by checking on me before I go to sleep at night. She prays for me while I sleep and before we leave the house and that makes me feel safe. I feel safe knowing I have my own space. If I ever need a place to think to myself I have a place to go. My foster parent put me in a private school to keep safe and in a good learning environment that also helps me feel safe. I feel safe knowing my foster parent cares about how I am feeling.

KENDALL RECEIVED \$25 FOR TAKING THIRD PRIZE.



Le'Andre, age 8

My foster parents help me to do things myself. They tell me what's right to do and what's wrong to do. They help teach me self-control and not to pick up my sisters because I could drop them. They give me night lights to help me not be afraid of the dark when I am trying to sleep. Whenever I am unsafe at night I can always go to my foster parent's room and they can help me feel safe again. Whenever I fall off my bike, my foster dad always helps me get back up and do it again. One of the most scary parts of foster care is having to go to new homes and I worry about my family because I don't know if they are safe. My foster parents help me get my mind off the worry.

Maria, age 16

Before I wasn't feeling safe because I did not know what would happen to me the next day and I didn't really have a voice in what the next step would be. But now thanks to my legal guardians, I have a voice and can just ask them for their opinion or advice. We talk things over and it is ultimately my choice. This gives me a sense of security. I am not blindly stepping into the next day unsure of what is to come. My legal guardians have always been honest and straightforward about things that I need to know. I have also been honest with them and that has built a mutual sense of security and respect. My adopted dad always has my back. No matter what the situation is. He is very protective. My adopted mom worries about my safety and she makes sure that I am not blindly walking into a bad situation. Also, my legal guardians have an emergency contact in place in case anything were to happen to me and I have established a rapport with that person and I trust her.

Paisly, age 10

When I miss my brothers they say it will be ok and they will talk to me and let me know I will see them every month and that comes me down then I feel good about it. Sometimes when I feel like I don't get what I need in school they help me figure it out and when they feel like I can do it they have faith in me. If something is worrying me, they will talk to me and say that things are gonna be ok and they pray for me. Sometimes when I miss my mom and dad and family, they say things are gonna get better for me and they say it is gonna be hard but I got this and they will pray for me. When I'm happy they are happy to and we do a lot of fun things together that makes me know they love me.

More stories continue on next page

Michaelah, age 12

When I was first put into the system, I was sick with a cold. It was also my 11th birthday. My brother and I were taken to a respite home where there was a lady and her granddaughter. We celebrated my birthday, but all I could do was cry. A couple of weeks later, my brother and I went to live with my older brother. Next thing I knew was my little brother was removed to live with his birth father. It was very hard. I was with my older brother for five months, but his wife was not as fair to me as to her children. I had a choice to stay or leave. I left. Then I went to a foster home for 2 months. It was very uneventful because they didn't really do anything. I just stayed inside all of the time, and did nothing. Then I went to a wonderful foster home which I am still at. I have a cool room. My foster parents and I often meet up with my baby brother, which is very relieving to keep in contact with him. I really like it here. I feel safe here. I have a lot of friends now at school and my grades are good. My foster parents are very caring, sweet and treat me amazing. I "always" want to stay here!!

TJ, age 11

What makes me feel safe in my house is when my foster parents take me out to eat because it makes me feel like I'm at home. Another reason is their Always beside me so if any thing go's wrong they can protect me. Another reason is they are a cool family so they won't let anyone kidnap me. Another reason is they are very fun they love to play board games and video games they make me have a good child hood. Also they love to help me with my home work. Another reason is they take us on big trips like Washington dc. My last reason is when I get mad I still feel safe and they try to help me calm me down.

ALL OTHER SUBMISSION AUTHORS RECEIVED \$20 CONTRIBUTING TO THIS ISSUE



A reader asks ...

What are tips for new resources parents or things they should know to be successful?

To help answer this question, we recently spoke with Gaile Osborne with the Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina (FFA-NC). FFA-NC's mission is to educate, advocate, support, and promote partnerships that lead to positive outcomes for children, youth, and resource families in NC. Gaile shared helpful tips based on her experience as a resource parent and the support she provides through FFA-NC to new resource families.

Tips for new resource parents

- Give the placement 30 days before you start taking stock. Spend that time getting settled. It's not going to be easy because you are getting to know them, and they are getting to know you. Don't fret if the first week feels like a "nightmare."
- Ask questions and keep asking questions. Social workers may not intentionally hold back information, but they will share information based on what they think you need to know. If you ask questions, they will answer and you may find something you need to know, and maybe it was something the social worker didn't think to communicate.
- Ensure you have a communication plan with the social worker and family (text, call, email, frequency, etc.)
- Recognize that in the beginning of the case things are very transient, so you may get assigned one social worker and then another. Ensure you have a communication plan every time you are assigned a new or different social worker so that everyone is on the same page.
- Find out as much as you can about school including Individualized Education Plans

(IEPs) and 504 Plans and be prepared that social workers may not know the answers to your questions right away

- If you have pets, find out if the child is good with animals.

FFA-NC is working on a notebook for each child that comes into care. Our hope is that it will include questions and answers about vital information like health history, school history, etc.

Understand no one knows the outcome of a case at the beginning. Be upfront and honest about your thoughts and process information with your social worker concerning your family. Being upfront and honest can decrease the number of transitions a youth may experience.

You need to be fully committed to the child, even if placement only lasts six months. If you have any hesitation, walk away before committing to a placement.

Tips specifically for teens

- Be willing to collaboratively solve problems with teens. Think through what the end goal is and be flexible on how you get there. Can you come up with a plan TOGETHER?
- Focus on understanding what motivates them.
- Who are the supports in their life and how can you maintain those connections?
- Within 24-72 hours of a new placement with a teen, talk about and establish rules together. Treat teens like they should be treated and give control over to them in the areas that you can (they already don't have control over much of their lives).
- Encourage teens, but don't push too hard. Walk alongside them. The saying "it's my

house, my rules" can come off as too forceful.

Gaile stated that as a new resource parent, she didn't want her rules to feel forced on a child. "These kids don't need to hear things over and over. Less is more when it comes to verbal. Stop preaching, come alongside them".

Recognize that each child that comes into your home has their own identity. They are not likely going to fit the mold of how your family does things. Allow them to be themselves. Don't force your values and have unrealistic expectations.

FFA-NC is hoping to create a virtual FAQ board to address questions commonly asked by resource parents in the future.

Response by Gaile Osborne, Executive Director of FFA-NC.

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 15 in this issue.

Children's Bureau Child Welfare Information Gateway

Partner with teens to help them plan their future. Include conversations about building a strong identity and support system from the start.

childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth

Supporting Children and Youth of Incarcerated Parents

“I got to spend the day with my hero.” How a little boy answered when asked, “What did you like best about the day?” His hero was his father and they were participating in Parent Day at a prison in late June.

Many (I’d even say most) children of incarcerated parents love their parents. They may not like them on certain days (welcome to the child-parent relationship!) but they love them and want to figure out what their relationship looks and feels like now that their parent is away.

The quote above is a short but powerful reminder of how important it is to children to maintain their relationships with their parents, even if those parents are incarcerated. We, the adults – the big people in a child’s life – can help them do this.

Even when a decision has been made that it’s not safe for the child to have a relationship with his parent, it’s still important for a person trusted by the child to be able to explain this to the child, answer questions, and provide support. Out of sight is NOT out of mind. Our goal is not to “make” the child forget.

At Our Children’s Place we remind folks that we don’t all need to be therapists or mental health professionals. But we never know who a child will talk to about their parent, so we believe it’s important for all the adults in a child’s life to have at least a basic understanding of what children experience when they are separated from their parents. What a wonderful way to reduce possible shame, stigma, and a sense of isolation if you’re the adult a child can talk to!

Language

Words matter! Instead of inmate, convict, or offender, think “mother, father, parent.” Listen to how a child refers to his parent and use that as your cue. Think also about conversations about a parent that a child isn’t part of but can overhear. Language matters then too.

Know the difference between jail (local, county facility usually run by the sheriff) and prison (state facility run by the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction, DAC, or federally run by the Bureau of Prisons, BOP).

The words we use may stem from our feelings about people who are or have been involved in the justice system. Acknowledging those feelings is important as you support a child and interact with the parent. Avoid badmouthing the parent; this can confuse the child emotionally. You may not agree with the parent’s choices and actions but he is still the child’s parent.

Visiting in Jail or Prison

Ask how DSS handles visiting for children with incarcerated parents. Will you be part of that? What are the expectations? Think about prepar-

ing a child for a visit and debriefing afterwards. It’s always wise to contact a facility right before a visit to confirm rules (such as contact visit vs. behind the glass), times, procedures (will a child have to go through a metal detector?), and any other important information and to share that with a child in an age-appropriate manner, which may include role-playing.

We’ve put together resources about preparing for a visit, telling a child the truth, locating the parent, and more.

Virtual visits are available at some facilities but not all. These are a tool to support the child-parent relationship but should not replace in person visits.

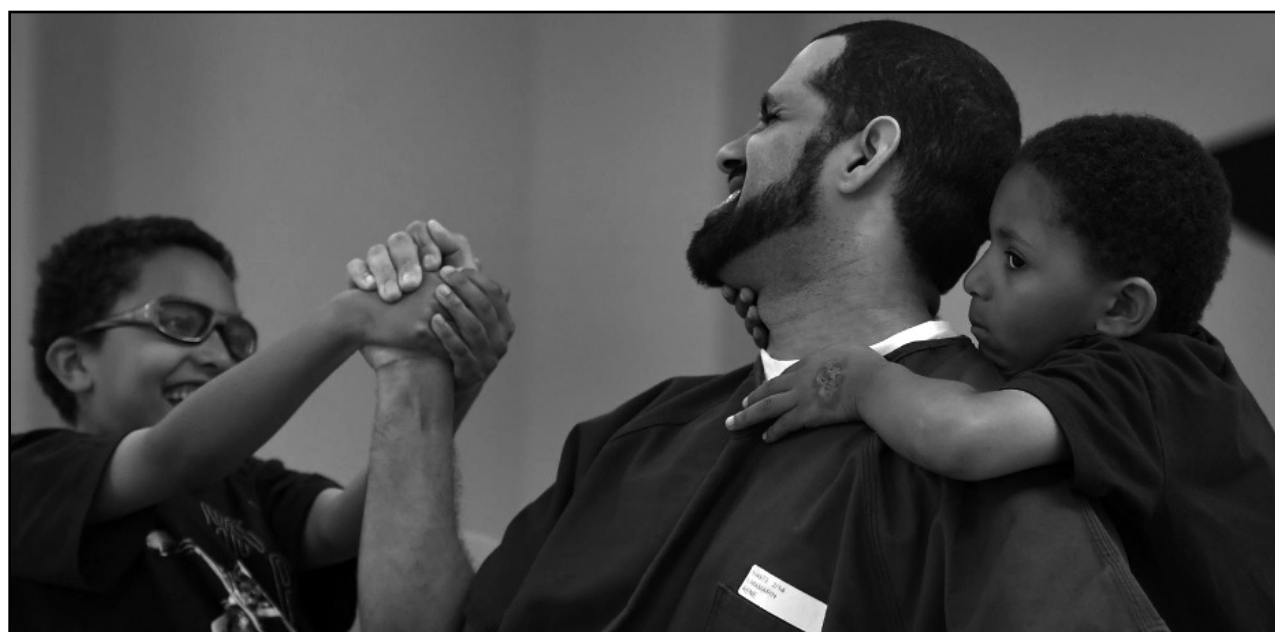
Some people think visiting a parent in jail or prison isn’t good for a child. If the child has a therapist or counselor, talk with that person. If it’s

of us, there’s something to be said for mail that arrives addressed to you, that was written by a person who loves you, and that you can read over and over again. Check on limitations set by DSS and the prison. Can a parent write directly to a child or must it go through a third person? The NC prison mail system changed in 2022 which means incarcerated people receive copies of mail, not originals. Some people in jail and prison have access to tablets, others do not.

Younger children may want to send drawings or other artwork. They could start a drawing or a story then send it to their parent who adds to the



Melissa Radcliff



decided that right now visiting isn’t in the child’s best interest (vs. not convenient for the adults), ask if there’s a plan to re-evaluate in the future. Children may also change their minds about visiting; a younger child might be excited about seeing her mother while an older child might be bored with a prison visit after having gone on several. A child should not be forced to visit.

A visit can reassure a child that the parent is still around, is doing alright, and still loves the child. Children who don’t have the opportunity to visit may base their vision of prison on what they see on TV, at the movies, or online.

Other Ways to Communicate

Visiting isn’t the only way to communicate. Phone calls to incarcerated parents can be expensive, are usually time-limited, and may be difficult for younger children. Consider talking with a child ahead to time to plan for the call: what time of the day it might come, what a child wants to share with a parent, what to do if the child doesn’t feel like talking, etc.

Letter writing may seem outdated but for many

drawing or story and sends it back. Again, check on what a parent can receive. A child may want to create a special box or scrapbook in which to store mail received from a parent. We’ve created a list of “together apart” activities that we can provide to resource families and professionals.

Be Creative

Think about ways to engage an incarcerated parent in their child’s life. How about sending a copy of a child’s report card or certificate of achievement? How about clipping a newspaper article about a child’s basketball game or school play and sending it to the parent? Is it possible to have a parent-teacher conference via conference call?

These require extra time and effort, but can make a difference in the child’s relationship with the parent.

Recognizing Trauma

Having a parent in jail or prison often is a source of trauma for children. This may include witnessing a parent being arrested and adjusting to a parent returning home after serving a sentence.

We all appreciate when someone really listens to us, without interruption and without judgment. Think about that when a child tells you how she's feeling about what happened with her parent. Acknowledge feelings, be open to listening to what can be hard to hear, answer honestly and age appropriately when asked questions ("I don't know" may be appropriate if followed up with "But let's find the answer."), and encourage her to come back if she wants to talk more. Explore finding a counselor or therapist with experience working with children in these situations if it seems like this intervention will be helpful to the child.

Support for You

Don't forget to take care of yourself as you care for a child with an incarcerated parent. Exposure to the justice system may challenge some of your perceptions. You may be asked to take on responsibilities you haven't anticipated (such as co-parenting

with an incarcerated parent). Maybe you, too, feel alone and unsupported. Consider what you need for your own care before you need it.

Our efforts together mean we can create a community where children of incarcerated and returning parents are recognized, supported rather than shamed and stigmatized, and encouraged to share their stories.

Melissa Radcliff is the Program Director of Our Children's Place (OCP) of Coastal Horizons. OCP is a statewide education and advocacy program focused on community support for children of incarcerated and returning parents. www.ourchildrensplace.com

Access Additional Resources Using the QR Codes



Our Children's Place



Sesame Street
In Communities



National Resource Center on
Children and Families
of the Incarcerated



Osborne Association



See Us, Support Us

Modeling and Teaching Emotional Coping Skills

Think of a skill you have that you are proud of. Now think about how and when you learned that skill. If it's a skill you've known most of your life, like how to write your name, you probably learned in steps. First you saw someone use a pencil to write out your name. And then you may have tried doing it yourself. Probably along the way someone familiar with the skill may have held your hand guiding you or used specific encouragement like "Nice job with that straight line!" Over time you practiced enough that the skill became second nature and now you can consider yourself a pro at writing your name. If you are someone who has a hand difference, maybe that skill of writing your name with a pencil on a piece of paper would be challenging, but you can still get your name on paper, perhaps with the aid of a computer or other device.

Crucial to learning any skill is being able to watch someone model it for you and then practicing the skill on your own. The more specific support given to you to help learn and practice the steps make the learning and using of the skill easier than if you had to figure it out all on your own. For humans in general, learning from another person you admire and want to copy can be the best way to learn and develop a skill. If that person is willing and able to think back about the steps necessary to learn and perhaps even demonstrate over and over again the steps they used to accomplish that skill, the learning can happen effectively and maybe more quickly than without the model for the learner.

Managing emotions is a skill like any other and it can be really hard to learn on your own. Those that cope best with challenging situations often learned how to notice, identify, and positively address their emotions by taking advantage of someone else's expertise in that area. As a parent trying to teach a child to cope with emotions it can be overwhelm-

ing to realize that you are a child's main model of coping with emotion. Of course, youth have many models in their lives, especially over time, but the ones they are closest often have the most impact. While it can be easy to be scared of your own influence it also can be important to notice and accept that fear and use it to propel you to try your best to model what you want the youth around you to learn.

If you struggle with managing your own emotions, it can be a great first step to find a role model that you can observe, learn from, and practice with who can encourage you. As adults, we can sometimes find models within books or phone apps that can help us better notice and manage emotions well. We don't have to always be limited to learning from a person right in the room with us.

Sometimes as parents, we are learning how to better manage a particular emotion or stressful situation just like the youth in our care. It can make us great teachers because we may know firsthand how hard it is to cope with challenging situations. We can use that empathy to make connections versus lecturing, judging, or arguing. After all, being human and managing emotions is hard. We have to realize what we are feeling and figure out how to act. When emotions are high, it is hard to think! As a parent of a 5-year-old who is prone to emotional meltdowns when she wants two opposite things at once, I can recognize that she is often expressing, very loudly, feelings I have in similar situations. I might not cry about wanting to wear two shirts at the same time, but at those moments I do often think about the time I had to choose between two job offers that would send my life in very different directions. There was crying involved then as it let me express all my confusing and conflicting emotions until I was able to make a choice.

When thinking about what makes a good cop-

ing skill it can be easy make labels like "crying is weak" or "yelling is bad," but the fact is that sometimes coping with a tough situation means letting out the energy that is being built up inside in a safe and socially appropriate way. Keep in mind, the definition of



Dina Gerber

safe and socially appropriate can change based on a person's age and location. Sometimes as adults, if we take a moment to think about what the child is doing, we might realize the child is doing their best to manage a challenging situation. Maybe they are coping in a way we don't like? Maybe they won't be able to use that skill as they get older? The question to ask is "can the child just keep using the skill in this moment or is what the child is doing putting safety of self or others at risk? If the answer is that physical or emotional safety is at risk then that is the time to step in to stop or change the behavior in the moment.

If a child is using a coping skill that don't seem to be great in the long run, that's when we get to think about how to consistently model the skills we do want the youth to learn. Sometimes it can seem like one more thing to do as a parent, but I understand the importance of learning and trying to manage my own emotions in front of my child. I know I won't teach her how to perfectly manage her emotions, but the more I am supportive of myself I can translate that to being supportive of her and her own emotional maturation.

Dina Gerber, MS, LCSW is a Trainer (ABC, RPC, and Trauma-Informed Care) for Duke University's Center for Child and Family Health

The Importance of Father Engagement

For many years we have asked the question in child welfare: does fatherhood engagement matter? What efforts should we be making as professionals to involve fathers into the lives of the children and youth we're working with? In hindsight, it sounds like a question with an obvious answer. The answer should be: as much as possible.

According to the Fatherhood Project, fatherhood engagement fosters greater academic success, more positive social behavior, fewer conduct problems, better self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and reduced contact with juvenile justice system. With overwhelming evidence that not only suggests, but proves fatherhood engagement matters, we now must ask "why are fathers disengaged?" What are the barriers to fatherhood engagement and how do we engage them more?

According to the United States Census Bureau in 2020, an estimated 1 out of 5 children live without their fathers. Additionally, children living in fatherless homes has more than doubled since 1968. Divorce, separation, death, incarceration, and abandonment are a few reasons for this epidemic. After over twenty years of professional experience working with fathers, foster families, and human service agencies I personally seen many of these myself. As we consider all of these factors, I would like to ask you to spend a moment thinking about these three considerations:

1. There are biases and stereotypes around a father's ability to parent on the same level as a mother. Women have historically been pre-

ferred over men as the primary caregiver. They are often solely expected to rear and nurture children. While on the other hand, men have been historically expected to "discipline," protect, and provide financial stability. In reality, we know these roles can be shared interchangeably by two parents, however that does not mitigate the impact bias and stereotypes have had on decisions governing bodies have made around policies, procedures, and practice. As these biases and stereotypes are identified and challenged, we open the door for parental reform that can further foster a strength-based approach to fatherhood engagement.

2. There is a lack of parent education and support which may prevent fathers from believing they can be effective primary caregivers. With confidence, acceptance, and support, fathers are more likely to engage in the parental caregiver role and in turn have less anxiety around communicating and advocating for themselves. Education and support also help individuals, communities, and governing bodies to see the value of dual or "village" parenting. This gives the village more reason to consider fathers, value their contributions, and give them a voice. It can also aid in better communication between agencies within the child welfare system which are often lead and primarily run by women. Child welfare agencies hiring more men would also foster a more father friendly environment and could create an overall enhanced synergy

within the child welfare community.

3. Finally, consider what resources are available. I acknowledge that resources in general can be hard to come by and availability is often limited, but consider what is available for fathers. Are there specialized programs, support groups, or resources specifically for fathers? Either formal or informal resources? Even if there are not resources specifically for fathers, what can be done to make them feel included in spaces which are often filled with mothers?

There is simply not enough room in a one-page article, or even a ten page article, to fully discuss the barriers and importance of engaging fathers without even mentioning other obstacles like affordable housing. Hopefully though, you have seen the benefits and challenges that are often present when engaging fathers. It may feel like there is a great deal to do, but it often just begins with addressing biases and inviting fathers to the table. The majority of fathers want to be involved. They may just not know to get there.

Walter Johnson is a Permanency Support Specialist with Children's Home Society



Supporting Youth Transitioning into Adulthood

Take a second to think back to your 18th birthday. Maybe you celebrated with a dinner and the people you love or doing something you enjoy. No matter how you celebrated, can you remember: did you wake up knowing everything about what it means to be an adult? With all of the freedom and responsibilities that come with that title? Of course not! No one wakes up and knows everything one day. You are where you are based on the experiences and choices that you've made based on the guidance you received (or didn't receive) along your journey. As you move into a new type of support role to help your young person figure out how to be an adult, here are some of the best ways to support them in their pursuit of "adulthood."

1. Begin often and early.

We set ourselves up for failure if we decide that we will wake up tomorrow adopting behavioral practices that are completely different than the routines that we have relied on in the past. Sometimes becoming an adult is stressful because our young people have been in exhaustively controlled environments and are then thrown into situations where they can do whatever they want. It can almost feel like a freedom overload. The best way

to ensure that they are mindful of the incoming increase in responsibilities is to provide them gradually increasing responsibility in their lives. Some examples of this include:

- Having them do their own laundry
- Assigning chores around the house
- Giving them the responsibility of cooking dinner on a somewhat regular basis. Encourage the use of technology like TikTok, Instagram, etc. to find recipes to make, and get the groceries together.
- Using MyChart and scheduling their own doctor's appointments (sit down with them while they do this to ensure they have transportation).
- Keeping a shared calendar to remind them of upcoming appointments and using phone reminders.

2. Relationships don't happen without regularity.

Does your family have a standing weekly routine? Or other family traditions? While it may not be in your family's style to have weekly traditions, reach out and invite the youth to participate in new ones. Be willing to speak their "language." Send memes and use social media. Your willingness to seek out

and do things the youth likes is even better. For example, if they really like anime, suggest volunteering together at the local comic event. Remember, if you are around when things are going well, you are more likely to be one of the first calls when something goes wrong



Sarah Phillips

3. Empower them.

J. Warren Welch says it well: "Loving someone doesn't always mean trying to fight every battle for them. Sometimes love means trusting someone to handle their own stuff and showing them you believe they are strong enough to do so." It may seem easier to schedule appointments, finish paperwork, or complete other tasks FOR our young people. However, it is most beneficial to show them the trust that you believe they can either handle it themselves or seek guidance from someone they trust. They may not solve problems the way that you do, and that is okay. It may feel frustrating to allow them the space to watch them struggle. That is okay too! Acknowledge that feeling and sit with it. Allow your discomfort in watching them struggle

and build their belief that they can solve problems in the future because they know they've been able to do it in the past.

4. Consider starting with the “negative space.”

For some young people, thinking beyond tomorrow has not been an option, as they were focused on surviving the present. When working with young people, asking them what their goals are may be too broad of a question for them to consider. Perhaps their experience has shown that what they want doesn't matter, or well-intended others will tell them what their goals are. If asking them is proving to be unfruitful in moving the conversation forward, ask them what they don't want instead. What parts of life do they know about? Do they see themselves living with a dog? Living in the same town, or somewhere else? How would they feel if they were living with you when they were 21 or up until 25? Do they see themselves in a job where they don't interact with people often, or one where they move around a lot? Identifying where NOT to go leads to the exploration of the possibili-

ties that remain.

5. Baking a cake doesn't start with cake – it starts with ingredients.

Some of our young people struggle with executive functioning. Even if they know what their end goal is, breaking down all the steps like the planning, multi-tasking, and focusing required to get to the end may be too overwhelming. Model the thought process of how to create a goal “front to back.” If that is not helping, consider creating the goal “back to front.” Let's use baking a cake as an example. To serve a cake at 7pm, it needs to be decorated with frosting. Do you need to make the frosting or do you have a can of frosting ready? Let's guess it will take 10 minutes to frost. To frost, you need a cooled cake. It'll take an hour for the cake to cool, and how long to bake? Your calculations may be off, but that's okay. Seeing an adult they know and trust be able to pivot when things don't go as planned help them reflect on how they could respond to unexpected barriers in the future.

But remember, you're helping them create the recipe, not cooking for them!

As we partner with our young people along their journey, it is important to remember that we as humans learn by trial and error. That means that we expect error – both from our young people and from ourselves. To err is to be human. We can all use that reminder. It's what we do when we make mistakes that helps us grow or keeps us stagnant. Don't be afraid to be their loudest cheerleader, their soft place to land, and recognize how valuable it is for them to get a point where they can be that all those things for themselves.

Sarah Phillips, MSW, LCSW-A is the Foster Care 18-21 State Coordinator for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

SaySo's Young Adult Leadership Council Shares What Supportive Caregiving Means to Them

Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo) is a youth-led advocacy program. SaySo has existed since 1998! Yes, the organization is 25 years old. SaySo is comprised of youth and young adults ages 14-26 who are or have been in out-of-home care.

The mission of SaySo is to work to improve the substitute care system by educating the community, speaking out about needed changes and providing support to youth that are or have been in substitute care.

When we were told the theme of this issue of *Fostering Perspectives* was the power of a supportive caregiver, SaySo leaned into our young adults to get their input.

SaySo has a Young Adult Leadership Council (YALC) that has 17 members in addition to alumni members that work for the program called SaySo Regional Assistants. These YALC members and Regional Assistants are from Pender, Moore, Halifax, Rutherford, Catawba, Gaston, Forsyth, Orange, Robeson, Wake, Pitt, Edgecombe, Cumberland, Mecklenburg, Durham, and Martin Counties.

During their most recent meeting, the YALC were asked about the power of a supportive caregiver, and this is what these young adults had to share:

What does a “supportive caregiver” mean to you?

- “Someone with genuine intentions, they want to see you do well and do not have selfish motives.”
- “Someone trustworthy. If you cannot trust your caregiver, then there is no one else you'll



lean on.”

- “A caregiver doesn't always have to be the person caring for you or living in your house. It can be anyone in your community. It's someone being there in your best and worst times.”
- “A caregiver doesn't have to be blood.”
- “Someone who won't judge you but will lovingly guide you while giving you space to express yourself.”
- “They are there when you don't need them and when you do need them, they will know who to call.”
- “Someone consistent.”

What does a caregiver's support mean to you? What power do they have?

- “A supportive caregiver can give you more confidence in yourself. You don't feel alone.”
- “They put life into a person. In the past, a person may not have always had that support but now that they do, the individual feels motivated.”
- “They are not going to pressure you into doing something.”
- “They can't make someone do something.

They gotta lead them in the right direction.”

- “A supportive person can encourage you, no matter if you're right or wrong.”
- “They introduce you to new things, new ideas, different perspectives.”
- “God is my supporter and has kept me going and going and going.”
- “It's having somebody in your corner who supports you and gives you a certain confidence when you get older”
- “They help me have more positive outlets for coping.”

Caregivers play an important role. They help to not only provide the physical needs but the emotional, social, psychological and well-being needs of youth in their care. Caregivers make a significant impact on the lives of the youth and young adults they care for. The companionship, support, and guidance they provide to young people can improve their quality of life and affect their overall foster care experience. The power of a caregiver cannot be overstated. Their role is one of the most critical roles to supporting youth and families that have been impacted by the foster care system.



To learn more about SaySo, scan the QR Code:





Help us find families for these children and youth

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



Daniel (age 16)

Daniel is a fun and personable young man who loves to smile and laugh. Daniel enjoys various types of activities such as coloring, playing with stuffed animals, and spending time on his iPad. He loves to go on outings in the community with some of his favorite places being the beach and bounce houses. During his down time, he likes to watch tv with favorites being cartoons, TLC and HGTV. He thrives with one-on-one attention and prospers with positive reinforcement. Daniel needs a caring family who will show him unconditional love and support and will be able to attend to his needs. He will require a patient caregiver who will advocate for his educational success. An ideal family for Daniel will have realistic expectations for him and provide a nurturing home with clear rules and expectations.

Daniella (age 14)

Daniella is an animal lover who enjoys spending time playing with her dog. Daniella is described by others as a really sweet child with a bold personality and is not afraid to be herself. Daniella has a zest for life that is contagious, and others enjoy being around her. Daniella is very passionate about the things she cares about and has a strong love for her siblings. She has established good relationships with peers and teachers. Her favorite subject in school is social studies and she really enjoys her social studies teacher. She maintains A's and B's and is involved in the music and choral program at school. Daniella would do well in a family that is nurturing and can provide her with one-on-one attention. Daniella has a close relationship with her siblings and will need a family who will allow her to maintain contact with her birth family.



Isayah (age 16)

Isayah is a quiet and reserved young man who is in need of a forever home. He has a great passion for geography and history and loves to share his knowledge with others. Isayah enjoys spending time on his electronic devices and playing video games. During his down time, he likes to immerse himself in a good book. Isayah would benefit from a patient family who will allow him time to get comfortable and settle into their home. It is important to him that he is able to build a trusting relationship with his forever family.

Jazon (age 9)

Jazon is the sweetest little guy who loves to be loved! He enjoys fire trucks, army men, and police cars. An adventurous one, he loves spending time outdoors on the swing set or playing with others. Jazon also likes to play dress up in old Halloween costumes for fun. When it's time to wind down he likes to watch cartoons or play on his tablet. Jazon enjoys attending school and gets along well with his teachers and peers. His favorite subject is recess as he loves the outdoors and being able to play. Jazon needs a family that will be able to provide him with one-on-one time and help him progress in all areas of life. Jazon's forever family will need to have strong advocacy skills and be willing to participate in services.



Lailah (age 9)

Lailah is a sweet, adorable little girl who has a contagious smile and bubbly personality. Her big brown eyes will win anyone over. Lailah loves to have her hair in ponytails. She is described as funny, loving, helpful, friendly, and engaging. It has been said of Lailah that she is "a happy, confident little girl who brings joy to everyone she encounters." She loves to be outdoors riding her bike or just having fun! This imaginative little girl loves reading, writing, and coloring. She has a great appetite and loves to indulge in new foods. Lailah needs a forever home where she is the only child or a home with siblings who are significantly older than her. An ideal family will be able to provide love and a strong emotional connection with structure and stability.

Aiden (age 14)

Aiden is a loving 14-year-old boy. He enjoys spending time outside, playing video games, bike riding, building/creating things, and swimming. Aiden is a caring teen who enjoys seeing others smile. He is constantly trying to make his family and peers laugh. Aiden does not have a favorite subject in school, but he enjoys attending and being around his teachers and friends. His teachers describe him as helpful and caring. When asked about his goals for the future, Aiden has stated several careers that he is interested in pursuing ranging from police officer, mechanic, and chef. Just like all children, Aiden desires a family to call his own. The ideal adoptive home for Aiden will push him towards his goals and show him nothing but love as they help him navigate life. He will do best in a home where he is the only child. Aiden requires a family that he can trust no matter what. He wants to know his family will always have his back regardless of the situation. Aiden shared that he wants a family that understands him and encourages him to always be his best.



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.

Please continue to share this page with others and help us find families for children and youth who need them.



Help us find families for these children and youth

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

Andre (age 13)



Meet Andre! This amazing teen enjoys being outside, working in the yard, playing basketball, swimming, and playing video games. Those who know Andre best describe him as funny, outspoken, and active. He is very inquisitive and asks questions to learn more about events and items around him. Andre is very talkative and loves to have conversations. He is outspoken and comfortable expressing his wants and needs. Andre has a sweet tooth but balances it with a healthy diet. A few of his favorite foods are pizza, honey buns, broccoli, and blueberry muffins. Andre is currently in middle school. His favorite subject is math. Andre is looking forward to finding his forever family and would love to have siblings. The ideal adoptive home for Andre would be able to provide structure and daily routine. Andre does his best when he is made aware of what is going to happen and is able to prepare for it. He will flourish in a home that is patient, loving, nurturing, and active.

Arya (age 12)



Arya brightens any room she enters with her bubbly and energetic personality! She loves to tell stories for entertainment and can be a bit of a jokester. Arya describes herself as brave, loving, and smart. She values having an adventurous and active lifestyle and can often be found going on outings within the community, going for walks, or simply spending time outside, enjoying nature. When it comes to music she likes rap, hip-hop, rock n' roll, and Linkin Park. This pre-teen has big dreams of becoming a scientist or beat box rapper and would love to have support from her forever family to achieve these goals! Arya has expressed excitement and a desire to be adopted. She would like to have a mom, dad, and older sisters. She would do best in a two-parent home or with a single female parent who has strong natural supports. Arya will need to be the youngest child in the home.

Hailey (age 17)



Meet Hailey! This teen exudes positivity with her sweet and generous spirit. Those that know her best state that Hailey is intelligent, ambitious, thoughtful, goal-oriented, genuine, and inquisitive. She has a creative side as she enjoys painting. A few of Hailey's interests include tennis, attending animal club at school, and playing board and electronic games. Her ideal vacation spot is the beach. Hailey has a great love for animals and plans to study to be a veterinarian or work with animals in some capacity. When asked about adoption, Hailey shares that she is very excited about the possibility. The ideal adoptive home for Hailey consists of a two-parent or single female home. Hailey will flourish in a home that is loving, open-minded, dependable, trustworthy, and honest. Any family interested must be open to maintaining important relationships that have been deemed safe and appropriate.

Children's Bureau Child Welfare Information Gateway

34 months

This is the average time in care for children waiting to be adopted. Black or African American and American Indian/Alaska Native children spend more time in care compared to other children.

childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth

Every teenager in foster care has a story to tell.

Make Every Conversation Matter.

QUICK TIPS FOR ENGAGING YOUTH:

- Be honest and real about what is happening.
- Focus on strengths, but share honest feedback.
- Be trauma informed and recognize when trauma is a barrier.
- Ask meaningful questions and listen with empathy.
- Share tasks and set goals together.

Children's Bureau Child Welfare Information Gateway

childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth

fostering perspectives November 2023

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

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Newsletter Staff: Jonathan Rockoff (Editor), Ashton Williams, Matt Tarpley, and Southey Blanton

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

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

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

Writing Contest

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

Please send us a response to the following question:



We want all young people in foster care to be the best they can be. Your foster parents and social worker can play a big part to help you be your best. What is an important lesson your foster parents or social worker have taught you? How did it help you? (Responses should be 200 words or less.)

DEADLINE: February 1, 2024

E-mail submissions to jrockoff@email.unc.edu or mail them to: Fostering Perspectives, Family & Children's Resource Program, 325 Pittsboro Street, CB# 3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. 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.



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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 v27 n2

1. What are two examples of healthy habits Dr. Andrews recommends caregivers model for the children and youth in their care?
2. How old was Jamie when she became the primary caregiver for her four teenage siblings?
3. Who did Lyrika say was in her support system as she transitioned into adulthood?
4. Meredith with Crossnore Communities for Children described a program called "Bridging Families" What do Bridge Parents do?
5. What are three ways Jeanne identified that resource parents can show respect and dignity to LGBTQ+ youth in their care?
6. What is one way Melissa Russell helped the youth in her care feel "normal" during the holiday season?
7. What are two strategies Melissa Radcliff shared that resource parents can use to keep youth connected to their parents if they're incarcerated?
8. In her article, Sarah talked about utilizing "the negative space" when communicating with teens. What is the negative space?
9. What are some of the benefits of shared parenting Amy mentions in her article?
10. SaySo spoke with the "YALC" to contribute to their article. What does "YALC" stand for and what do they do?

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NOVEMBER IS

NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH

childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth



National Adoption Month is an initiative of the Children's Bureau that seeks to increase national awareness of adoption issues, bring attention to the need for adoptive families for teens in the U.S. foster care system, and emphasize the value of youth engagement. The initiative began as National Adoption Week in 1984, as proclaimed by President Reagan. President Clinton then proclaimed the first National Adoption Month in 1995. In recent years, we have focused our efforts on adoption for teens because we know that teens in foster care wait longer for permanency and are at higher risk of aging out than younger children. Teens need love, support, and a sense of belonging that families can provide. Securing lifelong connections for these teens, both legally and emotionally, is critical in determining their future achievement, health, and well-being.

As of September 30, 2021, there were 114,000 children and youth waiting to be adopted who were at risk of aging out of foster care without permanent family connections.

- More than one in five children waiting for adoption are aged 13-17
- The average age of all children waiting to be adopted was 7.5 years old.
- The average time in care for all children waiting to be adopted was 33.7 months.