

fostering perspectives

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Paths to Reunification

The primary goal of foster care is reunification. From the time a child or youth comes into care their social worker, resource parent, Guardian ad Litem, and birth parent should all be working together to help the child or youth return to a safe environment. Of course, there are situations when children and youth cannot be reunified, and different permanency plans are put into place to serve the best interest of the child or youth. While those situations certainly occur, we begin our journey as resource parents with the hope of helping children and youth return home.

In this issue of Fostering Perspectives, we wanted to share a variety of viewpoints and experiences related to reunification. From youth with lived experience, to kinship caregivers, successful reunification stories, resource parents continuing to foster after grief, and innovate practices to move reunification forward, this issue’s contributors open up and share their very personal experiences. Hopefully this issue inspires, educates, and enlightens you to consider the different paths, strategies, and impacts of reunification. We hope you find it helpful.

Reunification of Children with Their Parents: The Primary Goal of Foster Care



Christa Smith

The North Carolina foster care system, designed to protect children from neglect and abuse, places significant emphasis on the goal of reunification with birth parents. Reunification serves as the cornerstone of the system, offering children a chance to return to the safety and stability of their biological families whenever possible. In 2022, 44.3% of children exiting foster care were reunified with a parent, a greater percentage than either adoption or guardianship, demonstrating the focused efforts of local Department of Social Services (DSS) on this goal. Additionally,

the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services requires that “Reunification with the parents, guardians, or custodian from whom the child is removed must be the primary or secondary plan unless the juvenile court makes [certain] findings that extreme circumstances exist, and reunification would not be safe for the child(ren).”

It is essential that social workers, resource parents, and other professionals work together to create an environment conducive to this goal.

The Importance of Reunification in Foster Care

Foster care serves as a temporary solution when children are removed from their homes due to concerns about their safety or well-being. Whenever safety can be assured, the biological family is viewed as the optimal environment for a child’s emotional, physical, and psychological growth. As a result, the primary goal of foster care is to work toward reunification whenever it is in the child’s best interest.

Reunification is not only important for maintaining family bonds but also for ensuring long-term emotional and psychological stability for children. Studies have shown that children who can return to their biological families are more likely to have improved outcomes in terms of mental health, educational achievement, and overall development. Reunification is a sign of healing within the family unit and reinforces the notion that family preservation, when possible, is integral to a child’s well-being.

However, reunification is not always straightforward. It requires careful planning, consistent efforts, and collaboration to address the underlying issues that lead to the child’s removal. Reunification may involve significant challenges including overcoming issues like substance misuse, mental health concerns, domestic violence, or financial instability. Despite these challenges, reunification remains the central goal, as it promotes stability and minimizes the trauma of separation from one’s family.

The Role of Social Workers in Reunification

Social workers are the primary professionals tasked with overseeing and facilitating reunification. They play a multifaceted role in supporting both children and parents during this critical time. From initial placement to reunification, social workers act as advocates, coordinators, and educators, ensuring that both the children’s and parents’ needs are addressed.

One of the first responsibilities of a social worker is to assess the child’s safety and well-being. After a child is removed from their home, social workers assess the factors that led to the removal and begin developing a plan to address issues. In some cases, this may involve connecting the parents with services like parenting classes, substance use treatment, or mental health counseling. For reunification to occur, parents must demonstrate that they have addressed

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Reunification of Children with Their Parents

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the concerns that led to their child's placement. Social workers are responsible for monitoring the parents' progress and ensuring that any services provided are adequate and appropriate.

Social workers also provide emotional support to children, helping them navigate the often confusing and distressing foster care experience. They are responsible for helping children adjust to their new living situation while maintaining regular contact with their birth parents when possible. Regular visits between children and their biological parents are crucial for maintaining the parent-child bond and for allowing parents to demonstrate their commitment to making necessary changes.

A key aspect of social workers' roles is advocacy. They advocate for the best interests of the child, often having to navigate the delicate balance of supporting reunification while ensuring that the child's safety and emotional health remain a priority. They must also ensure that children are not subject to unnecessary delays in the process, pushing for timely court hearings and the completion of necessary services.

The Role of Resource Parents in Reunification

Resource parents play a critical role in the reunification process. While they are tasked with providing a safe and nurturing environment for children, their role extends beyond that of a mere caretaker. Resource parents are often the first people to notice the child's emotional and developmental needs. They are in a unique position to provide valuable insights into the child's well-being, which can inform social workers and the broader case management process.

For reunification to be successful, resource parents must collaborate closely with social workers, birth parents, and other professionals. This partnership ensures that the child's emotional needs are met while also supporting the birth family's efforts to regain custody. Resource parents provide children with a sense of security and consistency, which is vital for a smooth transition when the child returns home. They also model appropriate behaviors, helping children understand healthy family dynamics and relationships.

Resource parents can offer encouragement to birth parents as they work through their service plans. While foster parents serve as a stabilizing force during what can be a difficult and tumultuous time, they may provide support by offering parenting advice, attending therapy sessions with the family, or facilitating visits between children and parents. When foster parents remain positive and proactive about reunification, it can create a supportive environment where children feel loved and biological parents are empowered to succeed, regardless of the outcome of the case.

Moreover, resource parents help ease the emotional transition that children experience when reunification occurs. When reunification is successful, children face the challenge of re-adjusting to their home life. Resource parents, understanding the child's emotional complexities, can provide continuity

and reassurance, whether it is through maintaining a connection or offering ongoing support to the family as they settle back into daily life. I have been fortunate to witness relationships between resource parents and biological families that remain connected for years following reunification, becoming an extended family of support for the children.

Collaborative Efforts: A Holistic Approach to Reunification

The reunification process thrives on collaboration. Social workers and resource parents must communicate openly and frequently, ensuring that every action taken is in the best interest of the child. This partnership is vital, as both parties bring unique perspectives to the table. Social workers have expertise in family dynamics, the juvenile court process, and available community resources, while resource parents offer first-hand experience in the child's day-to-day needs and progress.

For reunification to be successful, all parties must remain focused on the child's best interests. This means setting realistic expectations, being patient, and fostering a sense of partnership with birth parents. Resource parents and social workers should work together to address any setbacks that arise during the reunification process. This might include additional visits, further counseling, or additional resources and services.

In order to provide the most comprehensive support, it is essential that resource parents and social workers also work closely with birth parents. Involving the birth family in the process empowers them and fosters a sense of ownership over the changes they are making. The involvement of birth parents ensures that the path to reunification is one of healing, understanding, and commitment.

Conclusion

Reunification is the primary goal of foster care, driven by the belief that children thrive best within their families. Social workers and resource parents play complementary roles in this process, working together to support children and families through the challenges of reunification. By collaborating, these professionals can ensure that children are placed in environments that offer them the stability, safety, and love they need to succeed. Through ongoing efforts, empathy, and teamwork, children can be reunited with their families in a way that supports long-term healing, family preservation, and well-being. The success of the reunification process hinges on the collaborative efforts of everyone involved, and the shared commitment to providing children with the best possible future.

Christa Smith, MPA, is the Director of the Forsyth County Department of Social Services

You Are Not Alone: Success Coach Services



Chrissy Triplett

When children exit foster care, a new journey begins for their foster parents. It can be a challenging journey, but one they do not have to go through alone.

This can also be an exciting time, but it can evoke anxiety as the professionals who once supported you like social workers and Guardians ad Litem, are now stepping away. Every family has ups and downs after a placement leaves, and helping families through this process is one of the roles of a Success Coach. Success Coaches can help your family better enjoy the "ups" and survive the "downs."

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with Catawba County Social Services, selected Success Coach Services as the post-care model to support families with children(ren) who have left foster care through reunification, guardianship, custody, or adoption.

The Success Coach Service is a free, voluntary program designed to support families as they face challenges such as navigating education systems, guidance with attachment, parenting burnout, trauma and healing, financial challenges, substance misuse, mental health services, and much more.

What to Expect as a Resource Parent Seeking Success Coach Services

In the first two months of being assigned a Success Coach, you will meet with them three to four times so they can get to know your family and learn how they can best assist you. Your family will drive this process, focusing on

areas you feel will help the most. You will create goals with your Success Coach, and they will meet with you at least once per month.

Success Coaches believe engagement and genuinely getting to know everyone in the family are priorities when assisting during this journey. In addition to post-placement support, Success Coaches can assist your family with:

- Connecting with community resources.
- Helping resource parents assess their child's needs.
- Providing support, education, and training focused on your family's needs.
- Assisting in managing a crisis.
- Teaching parenting strategies that work.
- Offering support for special school needs.
- Access to a resource lending library.
- Assisting in how to talk to your placement and family about adoption.

Successes Coaches began in NC in 2010. Below is what families have shared about the service:

"It is good to have a Success Coach help navigate the school system and have someone at the [school] meetings."

"The Success Coach is your advocate... It was nice to have someone who was just on your side."

"I felt alone after the adoption was finalized, and I am glad I have someone for support and to help advocate for me."

If you're interested in learning more, below you will find who to contact for your area to inquire about Success Coach Services:

Region 2 - Catawba County Social Services

(Counties include: Rutherford, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, Iredell, Alexander, Catawba, Burke, McDowell, Wilkes, Caldwell, Avery, Watauga, Ashe, Alleghany).

Scan the QR Code to Contact Catawba County



Region 6 - Boys and Girls Homes of NC

(Counties include: Columbus, Brunswick, New Hanover, Bladen, Pender, Cumberland, Sampson, Duplin, Onslow, Lenoir, Jones, Craven, Pamlico and Carteret).

Scan the QR Code to contact Boys and Girls Homes of NC



Regions 1, 3, 4, 5, & 7 - Children's Home Society of NC

(All other NC counties not listed above).

Scan the QR Code to contact Children's Home Society of NC



Don't go on this journey alone. Reach out as success is not a destination, it's a journey.

Chrissy Triplett, LCSW, is a Program Manager with the Catawba County Department of Social Services

Scan to learn more about becoming a
Guardian ad Litem



Different Paths to Reunification: Kinship Care



Titianna "Titi" Goings

All stories are unique but wait until you read about how my kinship journey started and where we are today. Go ahead and put your seatbelt on.

Growing up as a foster youth, I craved those family bonds I saw my peers had at the Friday night football games in high school. I wanted to be with my biological family, even if the system deemed them "dysfunctional."

At 19 years old I broke the voluntary agreement I entered that kept me in foster care beyond my 18th birthday. Shortly after, I rented an apartment and instead of focusing on my well-being and continuing my education, I invited my mother to bring all her luggage and baggage (literally) to come live and build a life with me. I did not care that she was using drugs. I thought building a new relationship, sharing our hurt, and explanations for my "why's" with her would strengthen our bond. All I wanted was a fresh start.

In the mix of dishonesty and "love-bombing," my mother would sneak around and continue her ways, having unhealthy sexual relationships which resulted in the birth of my WONDERFUL little brother. After postpartum test results concluded and social worker visits started with my mother, my stable home was the start for a hope of keeping my mother and brother together.

When my mother did not do her part and the workers started talking about taking my little brother into care, the memories of being in care started to hit me. Memories of the day my siblings and I were told we were going to have to

be split up. The memories of scheduled visits and monitored calls. I had to do something. I could not stand to see another one of us in the system and quite naturally as a sister, I am attached and I wanted my baby brother to know his real siblings, his cousins, aunts, and uncles. I did not want my memories to be my baby brother's reality when he wanted to see or speak to me, HIS SISTER.

My brother, now 11 years old, enjoys STEM and art. I hope he continues to be curious and creative. I hope his curiosity sparks an interest in making changes to anything he questions or feels is unfair. I dream he grows up to be a decent Black man that will break generational bondage and build a life with someone who loves him.

We all know the saying, "Parenting does not come with a handbook." Times were hard for me, even dark, so I want to share with kinship caregivers to give yourself grace, accept help, and "water your own plant." I missed out on helpful incentives and social support because I did not want the system to think I could not provide for my brother. I grew up in the system, so no one could tell me to trust the system.

Finally, give yourself grace, even for the smallest things. I remember I used to beat myself up and battle with myself about if I was a "great mom." I eventually took myself to therapy and utilized community support like free food and clothes or camps, and basketball at the YMCA. I soon realized I could not even be a "decent mom" if I wasn't mentally and emotionally well.

Titianna "Titi" Goings is a SYNC Health Education Trainer with the Children's Home Society of North Carolina. She has lived experience in foster care and is a kinship caregiver to her brother.

The Power of Shared Parenting in Foster Care: A Personal Journey

Foster care is often viewed as a temporary solution to a difficult situation. However, it has the potential to become a transformative experience when shared parenting is embraced. Shared parenting, the collaborative effort between foster parents and biological parents, provides a stable and nurturing environment for children in foster care. It fosters continuity, reduces trauma, and ultimately strengthens the entire family unit.

Through our own experience as foster parents, we witnessed firsthand the profound impact shared parenting can have—not only on foster children but also on their biological families and us as foster parents.

Our Experience with Shared Parenting

We had the privilege of fostering two biological brothers, ages two and four. Initially, shared parenting was a challenging and overwhelming process. The boys' parents struggled with the responsibilities outlined by the court, and communication between us was strained. At times, it felt like we were working against each other rather than for the well-being of the children.

However, as North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) put additional staffing in place, the boys' biological parents began to receive the support they needed. They gradually excelled in their court-mandated tasks, proving their commitment to their children. Over time, they saw the value in working together rather than remaining at odds.

Once we were all on the same page, our relationship with the biological parents transformed. They kept open lines of communication with us, and we reciprocated by offering support and encouragement. We understood that the more time the boys spent with both their parents and us, the easier the transition to reunification would be. The boys wanted their parents around more, and we knew that strengthening this bond was crucial to their long-term stability and happiness.

The Benefits of Shared Parenting for Foster Children

For children in foster care, separation from their biological families can be a traumatic experience. Shared parenting helps to ease this trauma by maintaining continuity in their relationships. When foster and biological parents work together, children experience less anxiety and confusion about their circumstances.

In our case, the boys benefited immensely from the shared parenting approach.

They no longer felt torn between two households; instead, they saw their foster and biological families as a cohesive support system. This sense of security allowed them to thrive emotionally and developmentally.

Moreover, shared parenting fosters trust. By seeing their biological parents and us working together, the boys understood that they were deeply loved and supported by all the adults in their lives. This collaboration reassured them that reunification was not a disruption but a natural progression of their journey.

The Impact on Biological Families

Biological parents often feel a deep sense of loss and shame when their children are placed in foster care. This can make it difficult for them to stay motivated and complete the necessary steps toward reunification. Shared parenting provides these parents with a sense of hope and encouragement, reminding them that they are not alone in their efforts.

In our case, once the boys' parents embraced shared parenting, they became more confident in their ability to regain custody. Knowing that we supported them rather than judged them made a significant difference. They became more involved in their children's lives, which not only benefited the boys but also strengthened their own commitment to self-improvement.

Even after reunification was approved, the parents wanted to keep us involved. To our surprise and delight, they allowed us to continue seeing the boys and even invited us to take them for weekend visits. This ongoing relationship is a testament to the trust and mutual respect that was built

through shared parenting.

The Rewards for Foster Parents

As foster parents, we initially feared that shared parenting would make our role more complicated. However, we soon realized that it was one of the most rewarding aspects of fostering. By working alongside the biological parents, we developed a deeper understanding of the challenges they faced and learned to approach our role with greater empathy.

Instead of feeling like we were simply temporary caregivers, we became vital members of a child's support network. Seeing the boys reunite with their parents successfully was an emotional and fulfilling experience. Knowing that we had contributed to a positive outcome made all the challenges worthwhile.

Additionally, shared parenting allowed us to maintain a lifelong connection with the children. The continued relationship with the boys after reunification has been an unexpected but cherished gift. It serves as a reminder that foster care is not just about providing a temporary home—it is about building lasting relationships and fostering positive change.

Encouraging a Culture of Shared Parenting

While our experience with shared parenting was ultimately a success, we recognize that it is not always easy. Many foster and biological parents struggle with communication, trust, and differing parenting styles. However, when agencies and support systems step in to facilitate shared parenting, the process becomes much smoother.

To encourage shared parenting in foster care, agencies should:

- Provide training and support for both foster and biological parents to navigate the process effectively.
- Offer mediation and counseling to foster open and productive communication between families.
- Promote the benefits of shared parenting to remove any stigma or resistance.
- Ensure foster parents feel valued and supported in their efforts to collaborate with biological families.

Conclusion: A Life-Changing Experience

Shared parenting is not always easy, but it is undeniably rewarding. Our experience with the two young brothers and their parents taught us that collaboration, patience, and understanding can lead to incredible outcomes. It not only benefited the boys by providing stability and love but also empowered their parents to succeed and gave us, as foster parents, an opportunity to make a meaningful and lasting impact.

The ultimate goal of foster care is reunification whenever possible. Shared parenting makes this transition smoother and more positive for everyone involved. By working together, foster and biological parents can create a supportive network that fosters healing, growth, and lasting relationships.

Our journey with shared parenting has left us with a deep appreciation for the resilience of families and the power of compassion. We hope that our story inspires other foster parents, biological families, and agencies to embrace shared parenting as a pathway to success and healing.



The Bloch Family of North Carolina

The Bloch family provide foster care through Children's Hope Alliance

Message from Foster Family Alliance of NC

Dear Caregivers in NC,

As a foster, adoptive, or kinship caregiver, you know firsthand the challenges and joys of caring for children in need. Right now, we have a critical opportunity to advocate for positive change in North Carolina. House Bill 612 (HB612) is making its way through the legislature, and we need your voice to ensure it passes.

This bill Improves the practice and quality of legal representation, recognizes the importance of foster/kinship families, stops termination of parental rights for failure to pay DSS Child Support, strengthens NC DSS oversight of local county DSS agencies, allows post-adoption contracts for DSS cases, addresses conflict of interest in county DSS cases, and establishes secondary review for screened out cases. If passed, it will have a direct impact on families like yours.

How You Can Help:

- Contact Your Legislators – A quick email or phone call can make a big difference. Ask that they sign onto the bill as a sponsor and support the passage of this important legislation. You can email or call them to request they support the bill.

- Share Your Story – Personal experiences have power! Let lawmakers know why this bill matters to you and the children in your care.
- Spread the Word – Share this article on social media to encourage others to take action.

At Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina, we are committed to standing with you. Now, we ask you to stand with us to ensure HB612 becomes law. Together, we can create a better future for North Carolina's children.



Scan the QR Code to learn more about HB612 and links to find your legislator.



A reader asks ...

What resources are available for post-secondary education assistance for youth?



Thank you for asking this question and for being an advocate!!

We recognize that high school graduation season is closely approaching, and many are assessing if now is the time to explore their options. It is important that **Post-Secondary Education Assistance** information is shared with everyone that is connected to a youth or young adult who may be eligible to receive these services.

Many young people with foster care experience want to continue their education and achieve their educational goals. However, they may face more barriers than their same-age peers due to the enrollment process and navigating the housing and financial aid processes.

In North Carolina, eligible youth and young adults who experienced foster care, received their high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) diploma, and have not reached their 26th birthday, have financial assistance available to them for their secondary education goals.

Everyone's path and goals are different, so the funding available for eligible youth and young adults is for students pursuing an undergraduate degree, diploma or certificate at an approved institution as a full-time or half-time student. The Education and Training Voucher (ETV), and the NC Reach state educational award monitored by NCDHHS-DSS are administered through the Foster Care to Success Agency.

Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) – The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program is a federally-funded, state-administered program designed to help youth who were in foster care pursue post-secondary and vocational education. Funding is limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis to eligible students.

Eligibility Requirements:

Must be a current or former foster student who was:

- In U.S. foster care on or after your 17th birthday; or
- Adopted from U.S. foster care with the adoption finalized AFTER your 16th birthday; or
- Entered into a kinship guardianship placement from foster care on or after your 16th birthday.
- U.S. citizen or qualified non-citizen.
- At least 18 to apply.

In North Carolina, if a young person is starting a post-secondary program before their 18th birthday, they can apply for approval at the age of 17.

The maximum number of years a student can receive ETV Funding is five years (consecutive or intermittent).

You must have been accepted into or be enrolled in a degree, certificate or other accredited program at a college, university, technical or vocational school. To remain eligible for ETV funding, you must show progress toward a degree or certificate.

NC Reach – NC Reach is a state-funded and state-administered scholarship designed to help youth who were in foster care in North Carolina pursue post-secondary education. NC Reach is offered to eligible students for up to four years of undergraduate study at a North Carolina public college or university.

For more information scan the QR Code to visit NC Reach.

NC Reach Eligibility Requirements:

You must be a current or former foster student who was:

- A legal resident of North Carolina, eligible for in-state tuition rates
- Must be 18 years old to apply (if the young person is 17 years old when they start a post-secondary program they must wait until they are 18 to apply)
- Adopted from foster care after the age of 12, OR, aged out of DSS foster care at the age of 18 (they must have been in care on their 18th birthday); or
- Exited from foster care at the age of 14 to a permanent home through guardianship with the support of the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP)
- Enrolled in one of North Carolina's public community colleges, public colleges, or public universities.
- Under the age of 26 (participants remain eligible until their 26th birthday)

To learn more, use the QR Codes below:



Foster Care to
Success



CFNC

Continuing to Foster After Grief and Loss



Kate Schultz

Grief and loss are inevitable in foster care and, at times, the weight of goodbye can feel like the air has escaped from our lungs. We wonder, “How could I ever possibly go through another goodbye like this again?” Somehow, we pick up the pieces of our shattered hearts, knowing another precious child will carry a piece of us with them forever. Then, in the midst of joy that a child has reunified and despite the pain we might feel for our own broken hearts, we answer the phone again, “Yes, I can bring this child into my home.”

There is resilience in saying yes again after loss. I welcomed children into my home and loved them as my own, knowing their stay was temporary. I’ve watched them leave and wondered if I would ever see them again. Some reunified with biological parents who fought hard and did the work to show up as the healthiest versions of themselves for their children. Others transitioned to kinship placements, sometimes with just a few hours’ notice, leaving me scrambling to pack their tiny belongings while trying to prepare my heart for the sudden goodbye. Some children needed more than I could provide, and I grieved as the difficult decision was made to transition them to placements that could better meet their complex needs. Some of my kids have stayed forever, yet grief remains because love and loss always coexist in adoption.

There are many resource parents that have gone before me and many that will come after who I may classify as more qualified to give advice about continuing to foster, but I have learned a few things in my journey as a foster parent that I believe you may find comfort, solidarity, or hope in.

In my experience, a common question received by resource parents who foster for several years or foster many children is, “How do you keep doing this? How do you find the strength to open your home and your heart over and over again when you know the pain of goodbye is inevitable?” The answer is not a one-size-fits-all, but there are ways to navigate the grief and continue forward with intention.

Seek Therapy

Grief is complex and the emotions experienced in fostering are unique. In some cases, it can feel like grieving the death of a child, even though they are very much alive. One day, they are ingrained in every fiber of your daily life and the next, they are gone from your home but never your mind or heart. Sometimes, we are really fortunate when communication, visits, and updates become part of the story of families’ lives woven together through foster care and in others, there may be no contact for a variety of reasons. Having a safe space like therapy can help you navigate your own complex emotions including joy for a child’s reunification, sadness and grief for the loss you feel, and the lingering fear of another goodbye if you open your heart and home again. When seeking a therapist, make sure they’re a good fit. It’s ok if the first therapist or modality doesn’t work for you. What matters is that you feel supported to grow and heal.

Have a Supportive Community

Foster parenting is not meant to be done in isolation. Having a strong support system, whether it’s fellow foster parents who understand the unique challenges you experience, friends who show up with a meal and a listening ear, or family members who love both you and the children in your home, makes all the difference. Building a village can include your neighbors, friends, family members, and/or others in your community. Having a strong support system doesn’t just benefit you, it’s also a protective factor for the children in your home by giving them social connections and more positive adult relationships.

Build Resilience

Resilience is not something you either have or don’t have; it’s something you build. Cultural and spiritual support, community resources, ongoing education, and self-care all play a role in sustaining resource parents through seasons of loss. Finding healthy coping mechanisms such as journaling, exercise, prayer, or creative outlets can provide the strength to continue. The Community Resiliency Model (CRM) was, and continues to be, one of the most impactful tools for building resilience in my own life.

Know When to Take a Break

There is wisdom in resting. Taking a break between placements does not mean you are giving up. It simply means you are replenishing your capacity to love and serve well. A burned-out foster parent cannot show up wholeheartedly for a child experiencing foster care. Knowing when to step back allows you to eventually step back in with intention, offering not just a home, but the best version of yourself to both the child and their family.

To my fellow resource parents: I see you. I hear you. I share your story. You are not alone in your grief, in your love, or in your willingness to keep going despite the heartache. The safe haven you create in your home, your advocacy, and your love are never wasted.

To those who are in the village: thank you. Being present in our lives matters more than you know. Whether you bring a meal, send a text to check in, help pack a child’s belongings, or simply sit with us in our grief, your encouragement helps us keep going. You grieve with us, celebrate with us, and remind us that we do not walk this road alone.

Stepping into foster care comes with a cost. Our job as resource parents is a sacred one: to love, protect, and nurture someone else’s child like they are your own and to provide a safe place to land until they can return home. Foster care is about believing that families belong together and coming alongside them to be their village when they need it most. It asks you to say yes even when you know that heartbreak is a possibility, if not a certainty, and we do it because every child is worth it.

Kate Schultz, M.Ed. is a licensed foster parent and the Director of Development with the Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina



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 the QR code.



Making a New Family: Adoptive Mom and Birth Mom

Katie and I met when I chose to adopt her son through Methodist Home for Children. Being that the adoption path is never easy for anyone, our story is unusual, though not unique to us.

Enter Dylan, a beautiful almost-six-year-old boy, with a smile that lights the room. I met him near the time that he became free for adoption.

Dylan's time in foster care created a great deal of confusion for Katie and her then-husband, the children's dad, as North Carolina is one of two states in which reunification and adoption procedures happen simultaneously. Dylan was having home visits, even moving some items home, while Human Services was preparing for adoption. After a while, it became clear that Dylan would not be moving home permanently. Sadly, his parents signed relinquishment papers.

Around this time, Dylan's little sister entered care and was placed with Dylan's foster mom, Crystal. Dylan's sister was working towards reunification, which complicated an already complex situation. Not wanting to separate her from Dylan, I decided to be her foster mom. This decision ended the confidentiality of the closed adoption, so before the children moved in with me, I had already met Katie and some of her relatives.

Thus began the relationship of two moms, growing from our interactions as we managed "Little Sister's" visits and attended planning meetings at Human Services.

After Little Sister moved home about eighteen months later, it was important to both me and Katie to keep the children together as much as possible, including play dates and weekend visits with me and Dylan. We, along with Crystal (their former foster mother), had joint birthday parties for the kids. My favorite photo is of birth mom, foster mom, and adoptive mom at Little Sister's fifth birthday party. All families came together for Dylan's milestones—

his baptism, performances, and Cub Scout awards.

Dylan is fiercely loyal to his birth family and needed his relationships to continue. I began taking him to birthdays and other celebrations. Katie's parents, as well as her uncle and aunt, invited him for weekend visits several times. Once the ice was broken, the extended family welcomed me in, and they even say that they have "adopted" me. For several years he has had unlimited access to all of them.

Katie and I have relied on each other and had many heart-to-heart conversations, finding common ground on which to build our lasting friendship. We have been honest about feelings and the impacts of this foster-to-adopt process. We are in and out of everyone's homes. Katie is very soft-spoken and handles conflict gently when it arises. She works to bring Dylan and me together in difficult times. Her amazing strength lifts me, and she is comfortable calling me when difficulty arises.

You might think, as I once did, that the birth-family story ends when the adoption papers are signed. For us, it was only the beginning. By building a continuing relationship with Dylan's family, both he and Little Sister have benefited from various people and viewpoints. Dylan considers Katie's second husband as his stepfather. Little Sister still calls me mom. There is always room for one more when love leads.



Nancy Almon (left) with Katie Jaeschke

From Foster Care to Empowerment: A Personal Journey



Carlina Shotwell

I remember the night before my 18th birthday like it was yesterday. I was awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering what life would look like without a system dictating my every move. No more social workers, no more check-ins, no more temporary placements—but also, no more safety net. While many of my peers were excited about adulthood, I was terrified. How was I supposed to build a life on my own when I had never been given the tools to do so?

For many youth in foster care, reunification with biological family is the ideal outcome. Some are able to return home with the help of family services and therapy, but for others, that door never fully reopens. I was one of them. My childhood was filled with uncertainty, bouncing between homes, longing for stability that never came. When I aged out, the world felt vast and unwelcoming. I had no guidebook, no plan—just a lingering sense of being unwanted, of being an afterthought in a system designed to protect, but not to prepare.

Aging Out: The Silent Crisis

The statistics on youth aging out of foster care are sobering. Many face homelessness, unemployment, or involvement in the criminal justice system. I could have been one of them. There were nights I had nowhere to go and days I skipped meals to stretch what little money I had. But I refused to let my past define my future. I realized that if I was going to survive—truly survive—I had to equip myself with the skills no one had ever taught me.

The Power of Life Skills: A Lifeline for Foster Youth

I didn't want another foster youth to feel as lost as I did. That's why I created the **Empower Yourself Life Skills Curriculum**—not just as a program, but as a bridge between survival and success. This curriculum teaches real-life skills that are critical to independence:

- **Financial Literacy** – Learning how to manage money, build credit, and budget responsibly.
- **Career Readiness** – Writing resumes, acing interviews, and developing workplace professionalism.
- **Housing Stability** – Understanding leases, tenants' rights, and how to secure a safe home.
- **Health & Wellness** – Prioritizing mental health, self-care, and overall well-being.
- **Building Support Networks** – Finding mentors, allies, and community connections to prevent isolation.

A Call to Action: Be the Difference

My journey could have ended in despair, but I found purpose in my pain. Now, I want to turn that purpose into action. If you believe in empowering foster youth, I invite you to support this mission—whether by purchasing the curriculum for a young person in need, sharing this message, or helping me expand these resources to more communities.

Foster youth don't need pity. They need opportunity, guidance, and belief in their potential. I know this because I was one of them.

Together, we can change the narrative. Together, we can ensure that no foster youth stands at the edge of adulthood feeling unprepared and alone.

Carlina Shotwell is a Life Skills Educator with lived experience in the North Carolina foster care system. Follow her on social media at @carlinashotwell (LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook)



To learn more about her work, scan the QR code



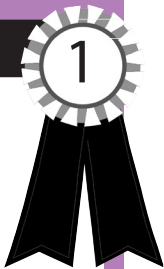
Writing Contest

In the most recent Fostering Perspectives writing contest we gave young people in foster care the following prompt: **“Advocating for yourself means telling others what you need to be safe and happy. Tell us about a time you advocated for yourself and who helped you.”** Here’s what they had to say.

Tattianna Age 16

A time when I advocated for myself was when I was going through a very rough spot and my intrusive thoughts were getting to me and my mental health was really bad. I didn’t think I would get through it but one day when it got worse I decided to try and reach out to my guy best friend Jackson, who I’ve been friends with since 8th grade. I told him about what was going on and he talked to me about it and about ways to help it get better and told me that I should also talk to my mom about everything going on and that’s what I did. I talked to my mom (AKA my foster mom who I love so much.) About everything and she helped me. I also got help from my therapist and everyone I trusted and loved and they showed me so much love and support. I’m forever grateful for Jackson (J) and my mom and everyone in my life who helped me and loved me and cared for me. I’m now happy and safe and I’m glad to have had that love and support. That was when I was 14 and I’m now 16 and I’m still forever grateful.

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



Tyrell Age 18

Advocating for myself was something I struggled with, especially during a difficult time in 10th grade. I was dealing with a lot of stress at home, and it began to affect my schoolwork and mental health. I wasn’t sleeping well, felt constantly overwhelmed, and didn’t know how to manage it. For a while, I kept it to myself, thinking I could handle it on my own, but eventually, it became too much. I realized that I needed to speak up. One day, I decided to go to my school counselor, Mrs. Thompson, and tell her what I was going through. I felt nervous and unsure, but she listened to me without judgment. She helped me understand that it was okay to not have everything under control and that asking for help was a sign of strength, not weakness. She connected me with a support group at school, where I could talk to others who were facing similar challenges. She also taught me coping strategies to manage my stress. That experience taught me the importance of advocating for myself. By speaking up, I was able to get the support I needed and learn how to navigate tough situations. Mrs. Thompson helped me find the strength to keep moving forward.

TYRELL RECEIVED \$50 FOR TAKING SECOND PRIZE.



Brooklyn Age 14

My father started abusing me when I was only 5 years old. I grew up thinking it was normal, until I was 14. It was my freshman year of highschool when a friend of mine told me that what my dad was doing was not okay, and not at all normal. She told me that I could get away from him, and go somewhere where I wasn’t constantly being mentally and physically abused. She told me that her mom worked in the system and she could help me. One day, her mom told me I had to say something. I told my school counselor, who called DCF for me. Thanks to my two caseworkers, I’m now able to live a day to day life where I am not in fear, and can enjoy the little things with my “found family.” In just three weeks, after spending two years in the foster system, my new family will adopt me. I was given a chance to speak up for myself and I took it, as should anyone else who is in a similar position, if given the opportunity. It will be terrifying and hard, but it is absolutely worth it.

BROOKLYN RECEIVED \$25 FOR TAKING THIRD PRIZE.



Conner Age 9

When I get MAD my foster mother Christina will always help me by telling me to get to the calm down corner or take deep breaths. After I calm down sometimes, we play a board game or do fun things. Whenever I am mad, I will always take a deep breath and go to the calm down corner or go to a different room. Sometimes all other people get mad, and they may do the same thing. Whenever I am sad, my foster mother will always ask me what’s wrong and I will tell her what happened so she can understand and help me out. Even at school friends help me when I get upset and sad, not just at school, even your friends who live next to you can help you understand like my friend Weston. Sometimes both of us get upset and we must go to different rooms to calm down like one of us plays the piano and one of us plays the drums, usually we are not in the same room. Sometimes me and my foster mother Christina both get mad so we both go to different rooms.

Chloe Age 12

I struggle with having anxiety and have a difficult time telling people when I need help. My adoptive mom has been encouraging me to advocate for myself and speak up when something is bothering me. My right ear has had a lot of infections and developed a perforation in the ear drum. I had surgery to fix the hole and returned to school a few days later. When I played my instrument during band class, I started to feel dizzy and felt pain in my right ear. After getting home from school I told my mom about how my ear and head felt during band class. She said that I should tell my band teacher about what happened when I played. I was incredibly nervous to tell my band teacher. When I got to school the next day I remembered what my mom said to me and told the band teacher about my ear. I’m relieved I spoke up because she was very understanding and told me I could just imitate the notes. After my ear heals completely I can go back to playing without pain.

Emily Age 9

I advocated for myself when an adult abused me. He told me not to tell anyone because he would get in trouble. I kept it a secret until after school and I felt guilty. But then I told my mom. When I got put into foster care, I felt able to tell my foster parents and they took me to therapy to help me process it. Eventually, I told DSS.

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

Bridging Families©, The Way Home

One Step Toward Child Welfare Transformation



Dr. Sarah Norris, Ed.D,
MBA, M.Ed.

The Crisis in the System

The child welfare system is in deep crisis. Children and families engaging with the system are facing more complex and layered trauma than ever before, yet the system was never designed to meet this level of need. As a result, not only are their needs going unmet, they are often experiencing additional harm, compounding the trauma they've already endured.

The complexity of children's needs is increasing and the number of licensed foster homes has been declining for years, leaving children with either an under-resourced placement or no placement at all. Sibling groups are regularly separated and unnecessarily linger in care. Parents often struggle to navigate a system that can feel more punitive than restorative and the professionals working with the families are exhausted.

Families and children are not failing the system, the system is failing them. Traditional, volunteer-based foster care, no matter how well-intended, is not structured to meet the scale or complexity of today's challenges. We are at a pivotal moment. A volunteer-based model cannot carry a system in crisis. We must reimagine foster care if we want different results, better outcomes, and a system that heals rather than harms.

An Innovative Model

Crossnore Communities for Children developed Bridging Families© as a direct response to the structural limitations of the current system. This model fundamentally challenges the assumptions of how foster care works best. Rather than presuming foster parents must be volunteers, Bridging Families© positions them as full-time, professional partners working alongside the birth families and their children throughout the reunification process.

This shift is rooted in the core belief that families belong together, and when removal cannot be avoided, every effort should be focused on reunifying as safely and quickly as possible. Bridging Families© is built to help children and families find their way home.

The Beginnings of an Idea

In 2021, the model emerged as a systems intervention rooted in intellectual curiosity and a willingness to question long-standing norms. Its development was grounded in research and practical application, and focused on what's best for children and families. Very quickly, numerous funders supported the pilot's initial expansion into Crossnore's three primary regions. In 2024, the model was adopted by the North Carolina Department of Health & Human Services as the state's only endorsed professional foster parenting model with the support of a 2-year, \$1.8 million state contract, alongside an additional \$3.75 million investment from The Leon Levine Foundation.

These investments served as the catalyst to launch the Bridging Families© Institute and to support the expansion of the model statewide.

The Approach

In the traditional system, the relationship between the birth family and foster parents is often strained or non-existent. Bridging Families© takes an approach that fosters connection, mutual respect, and a shared purpose

between caregivers and parents.

Rather than navigating the system on their own, families are supported by an integrated team that empowers them along the way. The model removes common structural barriers like fragmented services, inconsistent and limited visitation, and adversarial co-parenting dynamics by embedding professional parenting within a therapeutic, team-driven framework.

Bridge Parents are committed professionals who engage with the entire family throughout their journey in the child welfare system. They become part of an intentional effort to restore families. With full-time compensation, specialized training, and a team-based approach, this model minimizes foster parenting barriers and positions bridge parents to effectively support families on their path to reunification.

This model also provides meaningful support to DSS social workers by functioning as an extension of the case planning team. The Bridging Families© team works closely with DSS, sharing responsibility for family engagement, case planning, and reunification efforts.

What's to Come

Over the next several years, the Bridging Families© model will expand across North Carolina through the work of the Bridging Families© Institute. The Institute provides training, coaching, consultation, and readiness support to child placement agencies committed to implementing the model with fidelity.

Crossnore's commitment to systems change is long-term. We are not only responding to a current crisis, we are building toward a future where children experience the foster care system differently. Our focus is not only on program expansion but on policy reform, funding realignment, and a transformation of the norms and assumptions that shape child welfare practice.

The foster care system does not need more band-aids. It needs bold, intentional, long-lasting alternatives. Bridging Families© is one example of what's possible when we challenge the status quo; however, it cannot stand alone. If we want different results, we must think and act differently. At Crossnore, our hope is not only that other agencies will adopt this model, but that it marks the beginning of a greater, shared commitment to change across the entire system. Systems change work requires more than isolated efforts. A unified, strategic response to the system's brokenness is what children and families truly deserve.

Bridging Families© is just one step toward home, for children, for families, and for a stronger, more effective child welfare system. True transformation will require a collective commitment to doing what is hard, what is different, and what is right. Children belong with their families. Every step we take toward that truth takes us closer to the future they deserve.

To learn more or inquire about implementation, visit crossnore.org/bridging-families or contact Dr. Dawn O'Malley at domalley@crossnore.org.

Dr. Sarah Norris, Ed.D, MBA, M.Ed. is the Chief Program Officer with Crossnore Communities for Children

Addressing Sexualized Behavior



Nikki Croteau-Johnson

Let's be honest, parenting in today's world is difficult. When we add in the fact that children and adolescents have 24-hour access to social networking and media, parenting becomes even more difficult as children are regularly exposed to mature content and sexual themes. Yet, sex remains a topic that can be embarrassing and hard for parents to discuss, particularly with their own children. Parenting classes and books rarely address sexual behaviors in children, and parents are often reluctant to ask questions or broach the subject with professionals, their own

family, or their friend network. This can lead to parents feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to navigate these hard topics with their children. The purpose of this article is to educate parents about children's behavior to assist them in determining if a child's sexual behavior is typical or something to be concerned about.

Children's sexual awareness begins in infancy and continues to strengthen throughout preschool and school-age years. All aspects of children's development, including cognitive, language, motor, social, emotional and sexual development are linked to each other. Children are naturally curious, not only about their own bodies, but also about other people's bodies. Their sense of wonder and curiosity often leads children to seek out information and experiences to help them understand their world. For example, a five-year child whose parent is pregnant with a new sibling might ask a lot of questions about where babies come from. If a parent is reluctant or unsure of how to handle these questions, children may turn to other sources of information to get their questions answered, which can expose children to inaccurate or unhelpful information. In another example, an eleven-year-old child may have recently begun playing sports at school and is often changing in a locker room with other children allowing the opportunity to notice that bodies can look different. This results in the child asking a peer to compare the size and look of their private parts, leading to the parent receiving a call from the other child's parent notifying them of the behavior. In yet another example, a parent recently discovers that their fifteen-year-old child has been looking at pornography on their PlayStation 5.

As you can see, the kinds of information children seek out, and the behaviors they engage in are directly related to where they are developmentally, as well as the environments they are exposed to. In all of the above examples, the behavior of the children involved would be considered typical/normal sexual behavior for their age. Notice that all of the behaviors were curiosity based in nature. In instances like these, we recommend parents respond by first taking a deep breath! While that is easier said than done, children respond best when approached in a calm, non-judgmental way. Next, we would recommend that parents provide education in the area that appears most relevant given the situation. Examples of responses may include:

- Provide education about accurate names and functions of all body parts
 - ◊ This also assists children in being able to correctly describe any problems they may have and is a core component of abuse prevention

- Include information about social rules of behavior and privacy. Develop clear rules about where self-care should happen (behind closed doors).
 - ◊ Make sure to model this for your children!
- Address consent and how to respect their own bodies and those of others. Assist in helping your child develop the language and skills necessary to speak up for themselves.
- Engage in conversations about friendships and intimate relationships. Help your child understand what characteristics make a good friend and equally what makes someone trustworthy.
- Provide sex education that is appropriate for the child's age and developmental level. This should include information related to bodily changes that occur during puberty.
- Monitor and supervise electronic devices. Develop clear rules and expectations for device time and access. Make sure to model this behavior for your children!

So, when should parents or other professionals be concerned about a child's sexual behavior? When evaluating whether sexual behaviors have become concerning or problematic, there are a variety of factors to consider when making such a determination. Parents should be concerned when their children's sexual acts or behaviors have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Does the behavior occur frequently? (they happen a lot, not just every once in a while)
- Does the behavior take place between children of widely differing ages? (such as a 12-year-old who engages in sexual behavior with a 4-year-old)
- Does the behavior take place between children of different abilities (such as a 12-year-old who engages in sexual behavior with a 12-year-old peer that functions cognitively as a 6-year-old)
- Are behaviors initiated with strong, upset feelings such as anger or anxiety?
- Does the behavior cause harm or potential harm (physical or emotional) to any child involved?
- Does the behavior continue despite a parent engaging in typical strategies to eliminate or intervene in the behavior (such as discipline)?
- Does the behavior involve coercion, force, or aggression of any kind?

If any of these characteristics are present, we would recommend you seek guidance from a professional.

While the idea of addressing sexual behavior in children and the ensuing conversations that it involves may seem daunting, it can also be rewarding and bring you closer to your child. Children want to receive information about sensitive subjects from their trusted adults. Providing a safe space for these discussions and approaching your children with a curiosity based and non-judgmental approach will ensure that your children come to you with their questions.

Nikki Croteau-Johnson, MA, LPA is the Clinical Director with the Problematic Sexual Behavior Program at the Center for Child and Family Health

My Path to Reunification

My path towards reunification was and still is quite strange, and a unique story. As I sit down to write this article, it dawns on me that I have been reunified with my siblings several times throughout my life, and that my siblings and I will have to walk that path of reunification several more times before reaching a true end.

Let me explain, most of us were all separated from our birth mother as soon as we were born. I was reunified with three of my other siblings when I was three years old, and our biological great-uncle's wife adopted us one by one. I

vividly remember being excited and anxious about having a forever home and a sister. Then immediately, I became apprehensive at my older sister's response to our first meeting. She was probably used to being an only child by the time I came waltzing along. I don't blame her, but at that moment I remember feeling confused, angry, and hurt. We were not far apart in age—less than 12 months—but she had already grown far ahead of me. She was already disinterested in "kiddie" cartoons like SpongeBob SquarePants, "playing dolls", or any other "childish" things. She preferred "grownup" cartoons like "As Told by

Ginger,” rarely ever wanting to play “house,” “pretend,” or “dress up.” We immediately clashed as if water and oil were people.

By the time our two younger siblings came along my sister had gotten used to other kids in the home, and my other siblings loved cartoons and playing with dolls like me. But I still can’t forget that first impression my older sister and I had. I wanted to be closer to her. I wanted to build a relationship where there should have already been half a decade of bonding, of figuring out each other’s quirks, witnessing one another’s embarrassments, accomplishments, of teasing, joking, and understanding. Because there was practically none of that prior to our meeting half a decade into our lives, I was building that relationship with a practical stranger. All we knew was we were told we had the same mother. We were all building that relationship as if we were strangers. And it was strange. Go figure!

Yet, we walked that path together. Despite how different we were, what made us similar, or the many obstacles we faced getting to know ourselves and each other, we were able to build a close, treasured, and extremely hectic bond. Fast forward to our preteen years. Our great-aunt, adoptive mother, and the glue that held our dysfunctional family together passed away from cancer leaving me and my siblings in the less than capable hands of our great-uncle. We were eventually thrown into the system, again. Separated, yet again. After already going through the initial reunification process with each other, **this was devastating.**

It was even more devastating because I believe the adults knew that separating us was detrimental, but I suppose they had no choice. It was difficult to find a foster home that could take four pre-teens. They split us into groups of two. Oldest and youngest. We were first told we would not be placed together as the van pulled up to our new home. I do not remember if we were told where our youngest siblings were headed, or if we would be able to see or contact them. We were together every day for most of our lives and then suddenly we just weren’t anymore.

Though we eventually got visitation and could stay in contact, we were all growing, learning, hurting, developing, and living life away from one another, all while pretending everything was normal. **That is loss. That is trauma.** We suffered the grief and trauma of losing a parent and relived it when we lost each other for the second time in our lives. And then, to have to cope with that



Shanita Dildy-Goings

trauma without half of your support system. After years of this limited contact the progress we made bonding regressed.

Time passed and the youth we matured into young adults, and we finally came back together, if a bit awkwardly. When I was three, the unfamiliarity with strangers who were supposed to be my siblings was hard. The second go-round was like meeting my siblings—familiar faces—who have now somehow become strangers once more. We walked that tumultuous path of reconnecting with the help of trusted adults, mentors, foster/adoptive parents, and some really phenomenal child welfare workers who made the journey as tailored an experience as they could.

It is strange. Going from playtime to spending “adult” time together. Going from talking about boys to talking about politics. Going from watching cartoons to watching Saturday Night Live. Okay, some of us still watch cartoons, and anime too! Anyway, I say that to say this: things are going to change! It is inevitable, I am afraid. What must never change is our flexibility towards change. Reunification is something that needs to happen between willing parties. The work is hard, tiring, and long. It is a bond that is forged that is worthwhile. Becoming something strong, like the foundation of an ever evolving, stronger family legacy.

It is still strange. Now, when we are all together, we often talk about how life was in the past and what we expect to see in our futures. We talk about the people we could have been if things were different. My sibling’s children, my nieces and nephews, digging into our roots and discovering our history, going to therapy, being mindful of our health, healing generational trauma, and promoting generational wealth. I would have none of this community without the work my siblings and I have done and still do towards our reunification. More often than not, we end up talking about our other siblings we know are out there, raised by others either not knowing or not wanting to know us. Round three of reunification, anyone?

It will be strange! I like to think it will be quite a unique story as well. Our uniquely strange pathway to sibling reunification.

Shanita Dildy-Goings is a Special Programs Assistant with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. She has lived experience in the foster care system.

Safe Babies Court: An Innovative Approach Working Towards Reunification



Megan Burruss

Safe Babies Court (SBC) is a court-based approach that works to transform the child welfare system and reduce the time that a child spends in foster care before reaching safe permanence. SBC also puts a strong emphasis on timely permanency, preferably through reunification. Sometimes reunification is not always possible, which is why we regularly discuss the importance of permanence with every family that we serve. SBC aims to provide increased support and collaboration around babies and their families, through frequent family team meetings,

monthly judicial status conferences, and support services promoting healthy child development.

SBC was implemented in North Carolina in 2023 as a three year, five site pilot, after being recommended by The Chief Justice’s Task Force on ACES-Informed Courts. The current sites piloting the program in North Carolina are New Hanover, Brunswick, Durham, Yancey/Mitchell, and Rutherford/McDowell counties.

Prior to moving to North Carolina in 2024, I was a SBC Coordinator in Tennessee. When my partner and I decided to move to North Carolina and explore

beach living, my first through was “What if they don’t have Safe Babies Court there!?” I knew that working with families through the SBC approach was not a role I was ready to leave. I have seen this approach work! I have witnessed how the promotion of early intervention services and increased support and communication between the court, DSS, GALs, parents, caregivers, and providers has changed the lives of babies, toddlers, and their families – with timely permanence and increased rates of reunification.

A key part of SBC is that a family will have increased contact with their team through monthly family team meetings and monthly judicial status conferences. This increased contact allows barriers, challenges, and needs to be addressed timely. It provides a safe space to celebrate successes and talk about struggles. The increased contact supports building trusting relationships between families and everyone on their team, including the judge. Overall, these increased points of contact each month provide a platform to ensure everyone is on the same page so that timely permanence can be achieved. One of the mothers participating in SBC in New Hanover County shared the following about the increased contact of her SBC team: “SBC has been very beneficial for me and has allowed me to develop personal relationships with everyone involved in my case. I feel supported and am able to voice my questions, concerns as well as my progress and achievements in a less intimidating setting.”

continued next page

Safe Babies Court

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Family Team Meetings: Families participating in SBC will have monthly family team meetings. This means that families have increased communication with all people involved in the child's case; in an effort to address needs and barriers quickly. These meetings provide families the opportunity to have frequent support and additional access to resources. During meetings the team will discuss strengths, case plan progress, and any needs or barriers that the family may have. We are able to discuss the mental health and developmental needs of the child and secure early intervention services as needed. Monthly family team meetings really enable everyone on the team to work together collaboratively and frequently.

Judicial Status Conferences: Families participating in SBC will have monthly judicial status conferences with the judge. All members of the child and family team attend the status conference alongside the involved attorneys. The status conference is a time each month for the parent or caregiver to share directly with the judge about how they feel things are going from their perspective and any needs they may have. In New Hanover County, we meet for judicial status conferences in a training room instead of a courtroom. The chairs are arranged in a circle (pictured) and the parent/caregiver has a name tag to hold their seat beside the judge. We have worked hard to transform the room into a child friendly place with books, a color station, and tons of toys. We even occasionally have a nine foot tall blow-up Batman that makes an appearance at the status conferences, which the kids love. We hope that by having these monthly contacts with the judge in a much more relaxed environment compared to a courtroom, we can better foster connection, support, and instill hope while also continuing to discuss the importance of timely permanence for babies and toddlers.

"It [SBC] has helped bridge the gap that normally exists between clients, case workers and judges. During the status conferences, I am able to share things about myself and my progress, goals and concerns with the judge and social workers in a casual setting. I always understand exactly what is going

on with my case, and I feel supported and comfortable sharing my needs." – A parent participating in SBC

Safe Babies Court fosters a sense of strong support and collaboration around families. SBC strives to build hope for families as a path to move forward.

"Safe Babies Court gave me hope and confidence in myself. I have no doubt they did everything they could to guide me onto this path we are both thriving on. Safe Babies Court has been a blessing for me to be a part of."

While permanence is the drive of SBC, we ideally hope the permanence outcome can be reunification. So how can SBC support reunification outside of what I have mentioned above? Three words: Believe, Imagine, and Achieve. In July 2024 when we first started enrolling SBC families here in New Hanover County, we talked about ways to transform the training room that the families would be meeting in, from one with blank white walls to one with color and items that made families feel comfortable. Judge Corpening had wall art installed into the room that reflects the words, "Believe, Imagine, and Achieve." Below I will share with you, what he shared with me, on the ideals behind each word. I believe these words reflect how SBC can support families through their journey.

Believe: Through our work with SBC families, we can empower them to believe that their lives can be different. To believe that they have the capability to make lifelong changes for themselves and their child(ren).

Imagine: We can help families to imagine that their lives can be different. To imagine what that could look like for them and their child(ren).

Achieve: And finally, if we can instill hope in families to believe their lives can be different, and imagine what that might look like, we can support them in achieving those goals.

Megan Burruss is a Safe Babies Court Coordinator with North Carolina AOC serving New Hanover County. She has over 4 years of experience working specifically with children and families enrolled in Safe Babies Court.



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.



Path to Reunification for Older Youth in Foster Care



Reunification is often the goal for children and youth placed in foster care. For older youth, this journey is especially complex, as it involves not only addressing the immediate issues of safety and stability, but also preparing them for adulthood. SaySo, Strong Able Youth Speaking Out, works with youth and young adults ages 14-26. The perspective I'll provide comes from the experiences of those older youth and what they have shared.

Throughout the years, many youth and young adults have expressed they feel that reunification would be unlikely due to the severity of their parents'

substance misuse or mental health needs. For them, reunification doesn't seem likely and will not happen until they age out of care at 18. At the age of 18, many youth choose to reunite with their families of origin instead of continuing to receive supportive services. However, since Covid, some policies have changed and allow for more flexibility for youth regarding placement with their removal parents. So with that, the path to reunification for older youth in foster care requires a holistic approach, involving collaboration between social workers, birth families, foster families, and the youth themselves. It is a process

that focuses on strengthening family dynamics, ensuring the child’s needs are met, and preparing the youth for independent living while fostering healthy and supportive relationships.

Understanding Reunification for Older Youth

Reunification is the process of returning a child or youth to their biological family after they have been removed due to safety concerns. For younger children, this process typically focuses on ensuring their physical safety and emotional well-being, which may include parenting education, therapy, and rehabilitation. However, for older youth, the process requires additional consideration of their developmental stage. These youth are nearing adulthood and may have had more complex life experiences, often involving trauma, neglect, or abuse. Therefore, the reunification process needs to account for their specific emotional and developmental needs, as well as their autonomy and ability to transition into adulthood.

Family Engagement and Support

A key aspect of reunification is the involvement of the youth’s biological family. For older youth, rebuilding trust between family members and facilitating open communication are essential. Social workers and family therapists often engage with birth families to address the root causes of the youth’s placement in foster care, which may involve substance use, domestic violence, or mental health issues. Parent-child reunification therapy or family counseling can play a significant role in this stage, helping family members to heal, understand their child’s needs, and learn healthier ways of relating to each other.

For older youth, the process also involves a strong focus on ensuring that they have input in decisions about their reunification. Since they are on the cusp of adulthood, they often have strong feelings about their future. These youth may feel conflicted, both desiring independence and needing to rebuild their relationship with their biological parents. Engaging them in discussions about the reunification process, setting clear expectations, and providing them with the opportunity to express their concerns can empower them and help ease their transition.

Fostering Independence and Preparing for Adulthood

Older youth in foster care often face unique challenges, such as a lack of preparation for independent living. As they approach the age of 18, many youth in foster care must transition into the adult world, often without the necessary life skills, financial resources, or emotional support. As part of the reunification process, foster care agencies can offer programs aimed at preparing youth for

adulthood including life skills training, educational support, and job readiness programs. These services can assist in building the self-sufficiency needed for successful reunification and long-term stability.

Additionally, reunification for older youth often requires a shift in focus from the family of origin to the creation of a network of supportive adults. Many older youth in foster care experience a sense of loss and disconnection from their birth families, making it important to ensure they have mentors, community resources, and stable connections outside of their immediate family. Rebuilding relationships with their birth family is just one part of their journey; creating a broader support system is equally critical for long-term success.

The Role of Social Workers and Resource Parents

Social workers play an integral role in facilitating reunification. They help assess the needs of the family, track progress, and ensure the safety and well-being of the youth throughout the process. For older youth, social workers must balance the desires of the youth with the realities of the situation. Reunification may not always be immediately feasible, and it is important for social workers to recognize when a different solution, such as permanent guardianship or adoption, is in the best interest of the child.

Resource parents also play an essential role in the reunification process. They provide a stable and safe environment for the youth while also supporting them emotionally and preparing them for the possibility of returning to their birth families. A supportive foster family can ease the transition back to the biological family, offering guidance and stability as the youth re-enter their homes.

Conclusion

Reunification for older youth in foster care is a complex and nuanced process. It requires the collaboration of birth families, foster families, social workers, and community resources to ensure that the youth’s emotional, developmental, and practical needs are met. By focusing on strengthening family dynamics, preparing the youth for independent living, and providing emotional and social support, older youth can navigate the path to reunification with greater success. While the journey is challenging, with the right support systems in place, it can lead to lasting stability and healthier family relationships.

Ms. Carmelita Coleman, MSW, is the Executive Director of Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo), part of the Children’s Home Society of North Carolina

Courses on Fostering NC

Trauma-Informed Behavior Management

The focus of this course is to increase resource parents’ awareness of behavior management, how trauma impacts behavior, and strategies for supporting positive behaviors and managing challenging behaviors.



Promoting Protective Factors While Parenting Youth

The focus of this course is to increase resource parents’ self-awareness around parenting, enhance their understanding of the importance of developing supportive and authentic relationships, and identify strategies to strengthen protective and promotive factors with youth.





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>)



Amina (age 12)

Amina is an avid reader who is intelligent, creative, loves music and has a big personality. Amina is extremely smart and loves to learn. Her favorite subject in school is math. Her past teachers have commented that she could move up two grade levels and be fine. Amina's laugh is infectious and her out-going personality draws people in and therefore she has a lot of friends. She is a diva and loves to get dressed up and have her hair styled nicely. She enjoys outings in the community and being at the beach is a favorite for her. Amina also likes to spend her free time playing video games, riding her bike and watching family movies. Amina would do best in a two-parent household with parents who have an understanding of trauma. She will need patience along with guidance and structure to be successful in her adoptive placement.

Antonio (age 13)

Meet Antonio! He is a kind and loving boy with a smile that lights up any room. He is smart, inquisitive, passionate and loves to learn new things. He is an excellent student and excels in the classroom. His teachers have shared that he is a joy to have in their class. His favorite subject is currently English. Antonio is a social butterfly and popular amongst his peers. He makes friends easily and gets along well with everyone. Antonio's hobbies include going on outings to the beach, participating in band and playing video games. Antonio needs a family who will be loving, supportive and committed. He is a great kid who can do anything he puts his mind to with the proper support.



Shyanne (age 14)

Shyanne can be reserved when she is in new places or with new people, but once she is comfortable with her surroundings she exhibits her outgoing, high-energy personality! Shyanne is fun to be around and expresses herself creatively with dramatic play and impersonating celebrities. She also likes Go Fish, Connect 4, Uno, Candyland, and playing with her Barbies. One of Shyanne's favorite things to do is put the "Just Dance" video on a game console and dance for hours. Shyanne also loves caring for all sorts of animals. Shyanne has expressed her desire to be adopted by a loving family that will commit to her even during hard times. She deserves a home that is safe, has appropriate boundaries and will nurture her into adulthood.

Lawrence (age 17)

Lawrence is a fun-loving young man with a great sense of humor. He enjoys telling jokes to get others to laugh. Lawrence is a lover of country music and likes to relax and play video games when he has the time. His ultimate vacation experience is being on the beach while eating his favorite snacks. His favorite subject in school is math and he aspires to one day work at a manufacturing company to build and fix aircrafts. Lawrence needs a family who will love and nurture him while providing him with a safe and structured environment.



Taj (age 14)

Taj is an energetic and active teen who is interested in trying new things! He enjoys playing basketball, football, and soccer and often invites others to join in. If not playing sports, Taj can be found on his gaming device, tablet, or watching boxing events on television. This sweet, playful, and lovable young man is fun to be around and will have you laughing with his amazing sense of humor. Taj would like to be a boxer or teacher when he is older. When it comes to adoption, Taj hopes to find a forever family in which he is accepted and belongs. He would like a two-parent home and siblings.

Cassy (age 13)

Meet Cassy! This sweet and fun-loving pre-teen is looking for her forever home. She enjoys spending time with others, which allows her humorous and charming personality to shine. Cassy has several interests and hobbies including swimming, video games, and watching her favorite TV shows. With her loving and gentle nature, Cassy hopes to become a social worker so she can help children in foster care. The ideal adoptive placement for Cassy consists of a two-parent or single female parent home.



Damion (age 10)

Meet Damion! This young boy is excited for a forever home that will not only be supportive of his interests but participate in them as well! Damion has many interests and hobbies including fishing, spending time outdoors, animals, racing video games, watching Marvel movies, and country music. This adventurous and affectionate boy enjoys hands on projects and can often be found tinkering with items around the home. Those that know Damion best state that he is caring and has impeccable leadership skills. Damion hopes to pursue a career as either an engineer, police officer, or EMT. Damion shares that his ideal adoptive family will love him unconditionally and be supportive. He also hopes to have an active family that enjoys spending time outdoors. Damion will do best in a single parent or two-parent household.

Shared Parenting and Reunification: A Birth Mother and Foster Mother Shared Their Perspectives

Nadine: My foster care journey began in 2016. As a newly licensed foster parent I didn't really understand what shared parenting was or what it should look like. I knew from training that reunification was always the goal, but I had very little understanding of how it happened. I didn't understand the depth of bringing a baby home from the hospital and spending the next two years loving them and caring for them to then step away when reunification happened.

Our first placement left a permanent scar on my heart and taught me the importance of shared parenting. I left most of the communication between myself and the biological parents up to the social worker. I was encouraged to create a Google phone number where updates about my placements doctor appointments and pictures could be shared. We met in parking lots and passed the baby back and forth when unsupervised visits began. We stood tearfully in that same parking lot saying goodbye for the last time when reunification happened.

That is the reality of foster care. For many cases, that's the level of relationship formed between the biological and foster family. That biological family never knew where we lived and never saw the home their baby lived in for the first two years of her life.

That story is a success. That little girl went home to a mamma and daddy that loved her very much and worked hard to make changes. After reunification, I never saw that baby in person again. There was no relationship between her parents and us. That was when I started understanding how important it is to do the hard work of opening ourselves up to these parents. It's on us as foster parents to try to remove the fear these parents have towards us, no matter our own fears. We care for their children, and they deserve to know who we are.

Shared parenting is not always an option. Sometimes there are safety concerns and court orders that prohibit it. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, parents aren't able or interested in participating in shared parenting, but often it's our own fears that stop us from pursuing that relationship. When both sides are willing to work together for the best interest of the child, shared parenting can be surprisingly easy. We get to know and love our kiddos family. We get to be the cheerleader for them as they do the hard work, and we can celebrate with them as they make steps towards reunification. When that last pick up happens and you say goodbye it leaves a door open for future communication. You become a safe place for the family and not just the child. When it works well? It's amazing! Like when I met a sweet mama in the hospital in 2023 as I was preparing to bring her newborn daughter home with me...

Marie: When I found out I was pregnant in August 2022 while in full blown addiction you can imagine this wasn't something I had planned. I continued to use during pregnancy without seeking any prenatal care. I believed I was going to get clean just before my due date to avoid losing my daughter. Much to my surprise I went into labor four weeks early, shocked and scared, with full knowledge of the hospital finding out I was using. I wish that I could share a positive hospital experience but for me there was none. On a Friday afternoon after five days, I was discharged while my daughter stayed in the NICU. It was only two short days later that I got the call from a social worker that I would not be allowed to bring my daughter home when she was discharged. I was flooded with emotion despite already knowing this was most likely going to happen. This would be my first experience with DSS.

I was riddled with fear and anxiety. Having a daughter who was born dependent and needed extra care, love, and patience, I knew that she needed someone who loved her as much as I did. At the time, the only stories I had ever heard about social services were negative. I was terrified she would be placed with a family that might try to make it difficult for me to gain custody or even worse, a neglectful and unloving family. I had no idea what an amazing and loving home my daughter was about to have.

Upon my first meeting with Nadine, I was unsure how to navigate our relationship or how open she might be to having one. One thing was certain, I was willing to do whatever was in the best interest of my daughter. Fortunately, Nadine felt the same way. She was always making sure to send me text and picture updates on how my little one was doing. This helped me feel more comfortable and less like I was missing out. I was sure to let her know that I wanted to be able to attend all the appointments. For me, this was an important part of feeling included in the parenting process. Attending all the appointments allowed the two of us the opportunity to get to know one another.

Having support from the foster family is not only beneficial for the birth parents but also for the child. It can be confusing to have to move from one family to another and to have to adapt to those changes. For the child to witness the foster and birth parents working together to ensure what is in the best interest for them during placement and after reunification might help reduce the amount of stress and anxiety that the child might experience.

fostering perspectives

May 2025

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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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Writing Contest

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

Please send us a response to the following question:

FOSTERING PERSPECTIVES GETS MAILED OUT TO ALL RESOURCE PARENTS AND SOCIAL WORKERS IN NORTH CAROLINA! WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU WISH ALL RESOURCE PARENTS AND SOCIAL WORKERS KNEW ABOUT BEING IN CARE?



(RESPONSES SHOULD BE 200 WORDS OR LESS.)

DEADLINE: August 1, 2025

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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In-Service Quiz, FP v29 n1

1. According to Christa, for reunification to be successful all involved parties need to focus on what?
2. What are three different ways Success Coaches can assist a resource parent?
3. How did engaging in shared parenting while working towards reunification help the Bloch family's placements have a smooth transition back home?
4. What is the name of the curriculum Carlina created to help youth successfully transition into adulthood?
5. What are Kate's four suggestions for resource parents experiencing grief and loss after a placement leaves their home?
6. What are Tatianna's hopes for her brother in adulthood?
7. Describe some of the challenges Shanita faced building a relationship with her siblings after reunification.
8. What did Nancy and Katie do as an adoptive parent and birth parent to build their bond in the best interest of the children?
9. What is the primary goal of Safe Babies Court?
10. How is the Bridging Families approach Sarah described different than traditional foster parenting?

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MAY IS

National Foster Care Month

childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth

National Foster Care Month (NFCM) in May is an important opportunity to spread the word about the needs of the more than 391,000 children and young people in foster care. This year's NFCM theme—"Engaging Youth. Building Supports. Strengthening Opportunities."—shines a light on how we can best support young people and help them successfully transition to adulthood. This theme mirrors one of the Children's Bureau's highest priorities: ensuring young people leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports, and opportunities.

Nearly 20,000 young people transition out of the foster care system each year without a permanent family. In talking with young people who have experienced the foster care system firsthand, I've heard consistently how challenging it is to transition out of foster care, especially without the appropriate support. Giving young people the resources they need to succeed as adults begins during their time in care. It is crucial that we use that time to engage young people in case planning, help them build and nurture important relationships, and gain equitable access to the opportunities that all young people deserve.