

Family **TO** Family

TOOLS FOR
Rebuilding Foster Care

Recruitment, Training, and Support

The Essential Tools of Foster Care

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Special thanks to those who helped in the development of this tool:

Denise Goodman

Kathy Bonk

John Mattingly

Joanne Omang

Keri Monihan

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Mission in Child Welfare

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, a founder of United Parcel Service, and his sister and brothers, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that better meet the needs of vulnerable families.

The Foundation's work in child welfare is grounded in two fundamental convictions. First, there is no substitute for strong families to ensure that children grow up to be capable adults. Second, the ability of families to raise children is often inextricably linked to conditions in their communities.

The Foundation's goal in child welfare is to help neighborhoods build effective responses to families and children at risk of abuse or neglect. The Foundation believes that these community-centered responses can better protect children, support families, and strengthen communities.

Helping distressed neighborhoods become environments that foster strong, capable families is a complex challenge that will require transformation in many areas. Family foster care, the mainstay of all public child welfare systems, is in critical need of such transformation.

The Family to Family Initiative

With changes in policy, in the use of resources, and in program implementation, family foster care can respond to children's need for out-of-home placement and be a less expensive and often more appropriate choice than institutions or other group settings.

This reform by itself can yield important benefits for families and children, although it is only one part of a larger effort to address the overall well-being of children and families in need of child protective services.

Family to Family was designed in 1992 in consultation with national experts in child welfare. In keeping with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's guiding principles, the framework for the initiative is grounded in the belief that family foster care must take a more family-centered approach that is: (1) tailored to the individual needs of children and their families, (2) rooted in the child's community or neighborhood, (3) sensitive to cultural differences, and (4) able to serve many of the children now placed in group homes and institutions.

The **Family to Family** Initiative has encouraged states to reconceptualize, redesign, and reconstruct their foster care system to achieve the following new system-wide goals:

The Foundation's goal in child welfare is to help neighborhoods build effective responses to families and children at risk of abuse or neglect.

- ❑ To develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities where the children live;
- ❑ To assure that scarce family foster home resources are provided to all those children (and only to those children) who in fact must be removed from their homes;
- ❑ To reduce reliance on institutional or congregate care (in hospitals, psychiatric centers, correctional facilities, residential treatment programs, and group homes) by meeting the needs of many more of the children in those settings through family foster care;
- ❑ To increase the number and quality of foster families to meet projected needs;
- ❑ To reunite children with their families as soon as that can safely be accomplished, based on the family's and children's needs, not the system's time frames;
- ❑ To reduce the lengths of children's stay in out-of-home care; and
- ❑ To decrease the overall number of children coming into out-of-home care.

With these goals in mind, the Foundation selected and funded three states (Alabama, New Mexico, and Ohio) and five Georgia counties in August 1993, and two additional states (Maryland and Pennsylvania) in February 1994. Los Angeles County was awarded a planning grant in August 1996. States and counties funded through this Initiative were asked to develop family-centered, neighborhood-based family foster care systems within one or more local areas.

Communities targeted for the initiative were to be those with a history of placing large numbers of children out of their homes. The sites would then become the first phase of implementation of the newly conceptualized family foster care system throughout the state.

The Tools of *Family to Family*

All of us involved in *Family to Family* quickly became aware that new paradigms, policies, and organizational structures were not enough to both make and sustain substantive change in the way society protects children and supports families. New ways of actually doing the work needed to be put in place in the real world. During 1996, therefore, the Foundation and *Family to Family* grantees together developed a set of tools that we believe will help others build a neighborhood-based family foster care system. In our minds, such tools are indispensable elements of real change in child welfare.

The tools of *Family to Family* include the following:

- Ways to recruit, train, and support foster families;
- A decisionmaking model for placement in child protection;
- A model to recruit and support relative caregivers;
- New information system approaches and analytic methods;
- A self-evaluation model;
- Ways to build partnerships between public child welfare agencies and the communities they serve;
- New approaches to substance abuse treatment in a public child welfare setting;
- A model to confront burnout and build resilience among child protection staff;
- Communications planning in a public child protection environment;
- A model for partnerships between public and private agencies;
- Ways to link the world of child welfare agencies and correctional systems to support family resilience; and
- Proven models that move children home or to other permanent families.

*New ways of
actually doing
the work needed
to be put in
place in the
real world.*

We hope that child welfare leaders and practitioners find one or more of these tools of use. We offer them with great respect to those who often receive few rewards for doing this most difficult work.

O V E R V I E W

R e c r u i t m e n t , T r a i n i n g , a n d S u p p o r t

Bridging the Gap

Over and over, people involved with *Family to Family* use the image of a bridge to symbolize their new direction in foster care. For families, social workers, foster parents, and adoptive parents, *Family to Family* involves *bridging the gap of separation*. It means connecting birth families with foster and adoptive families for the sake of the children, and building bridges between agencies and the neighborhood from which many children come into care.

This tool is about recruitment, training, and support of foster families. But it can also be applied to kinship and adoptive families, for preparation for one kind of family care and should include planning for the others. This is called combined recruitment.

It is hard to overstate the importance and interlinking of recruitment, training, and support. The three functions are critical to the success of *Family to Family*, and they are so interrelated that the success of one determines the success of all. Do them right and everything else gets easier.

Overview: The Cycle of Recruitment, Training, and Support

From the first phone call potential foster/adoptive parents make to inquire about helping a child, they need to feel welcome, respected, accepted, and needed. This requires extensive personal contact from the start. If foster families have positive experiences with your agency, they will share their excitement with others in their communities, and that will help recruit others in their family and their friends to join.

Pre-service training is the place where foster families begin to be motivated and excited by their experiences. Through the mutual assessment process, foster families discover their strengths and limitations. They establish a good working relationship with the child welfare agency, and they feel empowered and eager for their first placement.

Once a child is placed, the foster family provides care and works with the birth family under agency guidance while friends, relatives, neighbors, and community members observe what happens. If the foster parents feel a sense of empowerment and self-worth, they will continue to recruit others to be foster parents and are more likely to become adoptive parents themselves.

Survey after survey shows that foster parents are the best recruiters of other foster and adoptive parents. Most adoptive parents were also once foster parents. If your *Family to Family* foster parents are enthusiastic about your program, they will quickly become your best sales and marketing force.

Experience shows that respecting foster parents as members of the service team making them partners with the agency staff and other professionals involved with a child and family is the best way to keep them involved and active. As one recruiter told a *Family to Family* workshop:

...we help people understand that they are valued and we treat them with respect, courtesy, and dignity. We look at recruitment not as just bringing people to the door; but also as helping them walk through it and supporting them throughout the process...

In the following pages, we suggest ways to rethink traditional approaches to finding, recruiting, training, and supporting foster parents so that they will remain in your system and that many more will consider becoming adoptive parents. The approach applies to every child welfare agency—large or small, urban or rural, public or private. We offer concrete actions you can adapt to your situation and steps you can take right now.

Families are your biggest assets. Here's why.

The Challenge

The pool of available foster families has been in steady decline nationwide over recent years, just as children coming into care are increasing in number. This is especially true for African-American children and children with special and exceptional needs. If the foster care system is not significantly rebuilt, this trend will continue, and the following will result:

- ❑ More children who could be placed with families will instead be forced into expensive and inappropriate institutions.
- ❑ Pressure will rise to license even marginal foster families who meet only the most minimal standards.
- ❑ Children will be placed on the basis of expediency and available space rather than matched with families in consideration of ethnicity and culture; closeness to birth families, friends, and neighborhoods; and the new families' ability to meet the children's special needs.
- ❑ Children will be placed further from home, limiting family visits and then services.

These factors could lead in turn to more disrupted placements, longer lengths of stay, fewer successful family reunifications, and more damage to children—and at the hands of the very system put in place to protect them.

The Changing Face of Family Foster Care

Between 1977 and 1986, the number of children in foster care nationwide was cut nearly in half, from a peak of 500,000. In the mid-1980s, however, the numbers rose dramatically, climbing back to at least 407,000 by 1990. Today, an estimated 550,000 abused and neglected children are again in out-of-home placements.

A major factor contributing to this sharp increase is illegal drug use, particularly the abuse of crack cocaine. Crack-exposed infants are the fastest-growing population of children entering foster care. This has created a wave of infants and very young children entering foster care and staying there for years without permanent families.

Another factor in an estimated one-third of cases is inadequate housing—families who are homeless or living in shelters that threaten children's health. Such situations are also a significant barrier to family reunifications.

Thirdly, increasing proportions of children are entering foster care with special physical or developmental needs, HIV, or serious behavioral and/or emotional problems. Such young people require more intensive and complex treatment than simple provision of food, clothing, and shelter.

Meanwhile, child welfare agencies continue to rely on foster family placement as the foundation of their systems for caring for children in trouble. But child welfare workers everywhere report alarm at the rising difficulty of finding families willing to take in children and at the rapid dropout rate of the families who do sign on. Why is this?

Lack of Support for Foster Families

Every day brings more proof that the problems of children in foster care are serious and complex. But too many family foster care systems seem to assume that foster parents need only to be capable of providing custodial care.

Such an assumption too often means that from the moment that prospective foster or adoptive families call with questions about

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taking in children until the moment they ask that no further children be sent, or that children be removed, caseworkers treat them as just a source of problems and complaints.

Inquiring families are often screened out, not in. Sometimes they are told, "You do realize that all of our children have problems, don't you? Very scared and troubled children arrive on their doorsteps at all hours, often without much review or any negotiation. Attempts by foster parents to get the most basic information about the youngsters may be met with indifference, unreturned phone calls, and a confusing bureaucracy.

Families often have to track down service providers and caseworkers to get help for their foster children. When the children have serious crises at inopportune times, especially after work hours, no one at the agency may be available to help.

Later, training for the families may be inadequate. They are usually required to attend a certain number of hours of training per year, but sometimes little systematic or participatory planning is done on training content or process. The time and location of the course may be inconvenient, and caseworkers themselves may not take part in the training.

No wonder foster families often feel unappreciated, unsupported, and completely on their own.

The problem in maintaining enough foster homes is principally one of retention. Many parents leave the system before their first year is over. According to the National Foster Parent Association, as many as 60 percent of foster parents quit in the first twelve months, when the hard realities of being a foster parent set in.

Surveys repeatedly find that the primary reason they drop out, however, is lack of responsiveness, communication, and support from the foster care system. Low reimbursement or the heavy demands of the job are not cited anywhere nearly as often.

As foster parents quit, foster children are subject to repeated placements, increasing the likelihood that they will suffer difficulties

in each new home. That in turn can delay the prospect of reuniting them with their families.

This is a vicious circle that better recruitment, preparation, and support for foster families can break. If the role of foster parents is clarified, and if the necessary training and support to bolster that role are provided, recruitment and retention of families can become less of a concern. It is far more cost-effective for a state to retain experienced foster families than to recruit and train new families continuously.

The Values of Family to Family

A system of values and principles, even when it is unspoken, usually guides agencies as they rebuild their child welfare systems. The basic beliefs of **Family to Family** are:

- Children do best with families.
- Maximum resources should go into helping children stay safely with their own families when that is possible.
- Most children who must enter the foster care system have more needs than the current system is geared to meet.
- Families exist who can and will nurture foster children and who will work with children's birth families to better care for them.
- Agencies can keep those families in the system longer by doing a better job of recruiting, training, and support.
- Many of these desirable families live in the very neighborhoods from which the foster children come. If we reach out to them in new ways, they are likely to come forward.

In this re-conceptualized system, family foster care is viewed as a temporary extension of the child's family, not as a replacement for it. Family foster care is aimed at preserving the original family unit and allowing maximum opportunity for the child to return to live with his or her family. The foster parents do not replace the parental authority of the child's family, but rather become reunification partners, supporting and maintaining the child's connection to the birth family.

In the new approach, foster and birth families are teammates with the family services caseworkers in caring for the children. The goal is to protect the children in a continuum of care, bridging what have been major divisions between the important people in the lives of children at risk.

Family to Family thus represents a significant shift from attitudes now prevalent, one that will change business as usual in many agencies. The new values can become most visible in helping to recruit foster parents and to keep them in the system, and in encouraging foster parents to adopt. But **Family to Family's** experience shows that without a firm commitment to these values, more traditional reforms such as larger reimbursements, additional training, and greater attention to recruitment are unlikely to rebuild a family foster care system.

Valuing Families: When it is necessary to remove a child, the family-centered approach is critical. The worker, the foster family, relatives, and adoptive parents alike must focus on the child's needs rather than cast blame on parents or anyone else. The birth family's pain at losing the child even temporarily is real and should be recognized, even as the child is withdrawn for its own safety.

Similarly, when a child moves back to its parents or on to an adoptive family, the foster family's pain of separation needs recognition. Neglecting foster parents' needs at this time can make them feel abandoned and might lead to their withdrawal from the program. Instead, they can be helped to remember that the child's need for a permanent placement is everyone's primary concern.

From the very first moment, in other words, the value of the family unit can be affirmed if concern for the child becomes the criterion for judging everyone's behavior.

Children need a stable and continuous relationship with a nurturing adult in order to develop physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and morally. Troubled birth families may agree that a relative's family, a foster family, or adoptive parents will do a better job in providing such a relationship

than they can right now, or than group care would ever provide. (Such institutional care is only appropriate for certain medical or mental health needs and is rarely an acceptable substitute for a family.)

Maintaining Family Ties: Foster care is meant to be, and most often is, a temporary service. Its function is to provide a safe and secure environment with minimal trauma to the child over separation from home and from the normal environment of family, friends, and school.

Foster families can be recruited and trained to know they will be asked to strengthen and maintain the bond between the children and their birth parents, no matter what the reason for separation, until all efforts toward reunification fail. At the same time, they can be reassured that their relationships with the children will be maintained and nurtured after the children move on.

Community Involvement: Foster care that is community-based builds the bridge between the sets of parents and therefore has a much better chance of succeeding. **Family to Family** envisions a richer relationship between the formal service system, the families, and the children's neighborhoods, using services anchored in the community and taking advantage of informal support systems that occur naturally there.

If foster care is rooted in the community, with family recruitment and training centered in the neighborhood and involving local people, resources devoted to foster care can become economic benefits for the community. The neighborhood may then come to recognize the worth of skills not previously valued because no pay has ever been involved. A neighborhood will be supported in regarding the well-being of its children as a community responsibility, not solely that of outsider child welfare services and distant foster parents.

Teamwork: Family to Family is a team approach. It involves not only the foster, birth, and adoptive families and the agency staff but the child too, who should be included in meetings on his or her future as soon as possible.

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R E C R U I T M E N T

Family to Family recruitment tools have become the foundation for new systems of child welfare. Simple changes have made tremendous differences. For example, recruitment efforts do not have to make any distinction between parents willing to provide foster care and those who might adopt. The idea is to find good families for the children who need them.

Some people long to help a child but do not know whether they can do it over the long term. Combined recruitment brings them into the system where they can decide later whether to become temporary or permanent families for needy children or both.

Recruitment is full-time work. It cannot be done as a sideline. It requires the concentrated planning, action, and follow-up due to a major agency function. In small agencies, recruitment work can be productively combined with licensing and training procedures, with which it is closely interwoven.

The Characteristics of Effective Recruitment

The **Family to Family** approach shows the most success when:

1. Staff members know the profile of all children coming into the system. What do they have in common? What are the trends? Can you group them in terms of age, ethnicity/race, sex, neighborhood, or need?

Answering these questions enables staff members to target recruitment to families most likely to be willing to help real children most in need. For example, if a system has medically fragile children who have been abused and neglected, drug-exposed infants, teens with emotional disorders, children with mental retardation, or young people who have been adjudicated delinquent, recruitment might focus on churches or other community groups involved in social issues, places where people have already demonstrated care for the disadvantaged.

A close knowledge of the situation also allows all respondents and volunteer parents to be welcomed and made to feel useful, regardless of their parenting potential. People unsuited to foster or adopt may still contribute in child or respite care, babysitting, driving, shopping, providing companionship, or many other ways.

2. Foster and adoption family recruitment is conducted as one effort. In nearly all states, 60 to 85 percent of families who adopt children from the public child welfare system are already foster parents. Children need families, and those that fit them for a little while may wind up fitting them forever. If used in this way, recruitment resources do double duty without competing.

3. Foster parents are part of the team and work in partnership with the child, family, worker, and other involved service providers. Agency staff should first and foremost treat foster families as full partners. And, secondly, foster families should act as partners with birth families. All are actively involved in developing and implementing the child's permanency plan. All hope for reunification, but commit to keeping a child in the foster home for as long as necessary, without disruption.

Working with a child's birth family is a relatively new responsibility for most foster care systems. It reflects a change in philosophy and attitude that some workers and experienced foster parents may find difficult to accept. It should therefore be emphasized in all aspects of family foster care, starting with recruitment, in order to promote the necessary attitudes and skills.

4. The agency tailors its programs of recruitment and retention, selection, training, supervision, reimbursement, and support services for foster parents to this new definition of their role.

5. Recruitment, training, and support services are closely linked, and one supports and stimulates the other. This has been said here before, but it can't be stressed enough.

Recruitment is Everyone's Job

The values and characteristics of *Family to Family* can, over time, come to permeate the entire child welfare agency. This means that recruitment will not be seen as the job of one department alone, even in the largest agencies, but will benefit from line staff and supervisors' help across the board.

In fact, staff members at every level of the agency should expect to work, even when off duty, in a partnership team with the foster parents, other service providers, and the child and family. A maintenance worker's trip to the grocery store may produce a conversation that generates a phone call of inquiry.

The idea of *constant awareness of recruitment possibilities* by everybody may seem to be asking a lot of overworked staff, but it will have big payoffs for the future workloads of everyone in the agency. One way to kick off this new approach is with a party for all agency employees where they are asked to help and to brainstorm about ways they can.

Recruiting for Real Children

Recruitment is most productive when the recruiters are clear about their goals and honest with themselves and with prospective

foster and adoptive families about the challenges the children will offer.

An innovative system will look to new sources for families—its own agency workers, semi-retired adults, or those receiving disability assistance who can be specially trained to do foster care, and people with education and experience related to special-needs children but who prefer to stay at home.

Prospective foster parents should come to understand and know how to deal with whatever problems might result from a child's particular needs. Recruiting themes should present a realistic picture of the job of caring for today's foster children—the obstacles and difficulties as well as the joys and rewards.

Family to Family workers seek to help all families—birth, foster, and adoptive. They tell the birth parents that the goal is always to take care of the child, not to take the child, and that everything they do aims only to achieve that goal until children can safely go home.

Here are some questions to ask when recruiting foster and adoptive families:

- Is the foster family an extended one? Does its composition resemble that of the child's birth family? How are other children in it likely to react to the new child?
- Are its members willing and able to work with the child's family?
- Does the foster family speak the child's language? How similar is it in race and culture?
- How close does the foster family live to the child's birth family, school, church, etc.? Would transportation be a problem in arranging family visits?
- What is the family's level of skills, abilities, and attitudes needed to work effectively with the particular child, especially one with special needs?

Recruitment, training, and support services are closely linked, and one supports and stimulates the other.

Targeted recruitment is the most effective in placing children.

Three Kinds of Recruitment

Standard recruitment activities generally fall into three categories: **general**, **child-specific**, and **targeted**. Of these, **Family to Family** has found that targeted recruitment is the most effective in placing children. Each approach, however, has a valuable place in a well-rounded program. We discuss them below.

1. General Recruitment involves reaching mass audiences through media and public outreach programs. These include public events, public service announcements on television and radio stations, billboards, foster care and adoption fairs, booths at county fairs or sporting events, etc.

This is the most common recruitment method, but it is the least focused, commonly urging the audience in general to reach out to a child or save a young life. **Family to Family** experience indicates that unsuitable applicants often respond, each of whom requires staff time. Or the respondents may not be willing to take the particular kinds of children who need families. Cultural differences can also mean that an advertisement attractive to middle-class whites may not translate well for Latino families, for example.

The most effective general messages express the values of **Family to Family**. Tag lines that ask people to help rescue an abused child obviously conflict with those that ask them to join a team that includes a child's birth family.

General outreach is best when used to raise the agency's public profile and broaden community awareness of the continuing need for foster families. Perhaps 15 percent of your recruitment budget can be usefully spent on this.

2. Child-Specific Recruitment can include finding relatives or a close friend who will provide a foster home to a child or teen they already know and care about. It can be used to find a home for a child with MS,

hearing impairment, or another condition that requires special care.

Cooperation from other neighborhood service agencies may be useful in locating an appropriate family. For medically needy children, you may want to contact support groups and associations related to the condition or disease. Careful screening of potential foster families can guarantee that the child is placed with the best possible family for that child's special needs.

In each case, individualized planning is required, and that is expensive. But special children deserve special treatment. Recruitment budgets might allocate 25 percent of available funds for this function.

3. Targeted Recruitment focuses on the specific kinds of children and teens in need of temporary and permanent homes in your community. Then it looks closely at the pool of available families.

First, assess the children.

Consider your children overall in terms of age, sex, sibling number and situation, race/ethnicity, etc., and in terms of needs physical, social, emotional, and cognitive.

What do the youngsters have in common? Can they be considered in groupings of needs? Are these groupings consistent over time? Are there trends or patterns of change? What will be required for foster or adoptive parents of each kind of child? Where is the need most urgent? Do particular neighborhoods seem to have the greatest problems, the greatest need? What sources are referring children to you? Can the population from each source be generalized in any way?

If a majority of children coming into foster care are adolescents, for example, your recruitment efforts can target families willing to foster several older children through local schools, churches, gyms, or community centers.

- ❑ If certain neighborhoods have a high proportion of children in foster care, your agency can develop an outreach effort in those areas. That could include sending speakers to neighborhood centers, One Church-One Child groups, public housing units, or PTA meetings, asking for help from families who can best care for the children.
- ❑ If medically fragile children are common in your system, consider sending a speaker to a brown-bag lunch at a local university hospital, a clinic, or a medical school cafeteria, where prospective foster parents would already have experience with such children.

Then, assess the community.

With a little research, you can form a fairly complete picture of your community's potential to provide foster/adoptive families for the children in your system. Then you can tailor your outreach and recruitment efforts to particular groups and areas.

Families have different financial means, religious and cultural identities, and educational backgrounds, as well as lifestyles, ages, values, housing circumstances (renters/owners), and organizational memberships. All of these can be factors in their suitability as foster/adoptive parents.

- ❑ Demographic and census information on your area can tell you a great deal about where each kind of family lives and about the people who live in your service area. These files are available from your local library, planning department, or state census data center, and people in each place can help you work with them. Or, you can get the information directly on-line from the Census Bureau at <www.census.gov>.
- ❑ Do the data suggest the presence in your area of families your agency may have previously overlooked as recruitment possibilities? These could include single-parent families, those with lower income or smaller homes, families with older adults, extended families, or households of unrelated people.
- ❑ What kinds of families have worked successfully with your agency in the past? Are there common neighborhoods, professions, activities, organizational memberships, media choices, backgrounds? Can they be divided into types? Did they cite similar motivations?
- ❑ Try to match these generalizations with appropriate messages. For example, older couples with grown children might respond if asked to apply their proven methods: Share your family's success with a child who needs it. Altruistic impulses: You can make a difference in a child's life. Desire for a large family: Do you have room for one more?
- ❑ Match your groups with locations in your area, and then look for places with potential for transmitting information: a supermarket bulletin board, a workplace newsletter, child care centers, churches. Who hangs out with teenagers—coaches, musicians, pizza-parlor owners? Find them at the gym, the radio station, etc., with your tailored messages.
 - For example, if your successful African-American families include many two-parent military couples, in their 30s, with young children, active in local churches, you can logically target your recruitment speakers for church socials, your posters to military post bulletin boards, and your notices for church and post newsletters.
- ❑ Talk to the teenagers in your system about recruiting. Teenagers who have been placed successfully are likely to be vocal about who makes a good foster parent and will often recommend people they know. You can offer them finders fees for any they locate who become licensed. Teens can be asked to help call potential foster parents, to transport them

Teenagers who have been placed successfully are likely to be vocal about who makes a good foster parent.

Targeted recruitment has proven to be the most effective in drawing the right kinds of families for the particular kinds of youngsters an agency has on its rolls.

to meetings and trainings, and to speak at those sessions about their own experiences.

- ❑ Don't wait for your foster parents to volunteer again—ask them to do it, and to consider adopting. They can be asked to host fosterware parties of their friends and neighbors where they and agency staff members can speak persuasively about the need for foster parents and the joys and problems involved.
- ❑ Think about values. Examine successful families' attitudes, perspectives, habits, and behavior to gain insight into the audiences you need to reach to recruit additional successful people. If you understand the values of these target groups, your messages are less likely to be misunderstood, resisted, resented, or ignored.
- ❑ Be culturally sensitive. Is your service area's demographic diversity reflected in your agency staff and on its board? Have you enlisted community leaders, gatekeepers, publications, places of worship, and other institutions to receive your educational materials and become helpers? Are you using appropriate messages? If you use multi-lingual ads, make sure the translations are right and appropriate:

David W. Helin reported these linguistic blunders in *American Demographics* (Feb. 1992):

- ❑ General Motors found out too late that its Nova meant it doesn't go (no va) in Spanish.
- ❑ Frank Perdue said "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken," but Spanish speakers heard, "It takes a sexually stimulated man to make a chicken affectionate."
- ❑ Coors urged, "Turn it loose," but in Spanish the phrase meant, "Suffer from diarrhea."

Targeted recruitment has proven to be the most effective in drawing the right kinds of families for the particular kinds of youngsters an agency has on its rolls. It merits perhaps 60 percent of the agency recruitment budget.

One kind of recruitment effort looks child-specific and yet goes to a mass market, but it is really a targeted approach, and an effective one, if used right. It's the weekly segment aired by many local television stations called *Wednesday's Child*, which features a certain youngster who needs a home.

These productions often draw callers who expect to take the featured child home that very night. The segments should stress instead that the child is an example of a *kind of child* often in need in your community, and that the particular child may already be placed by the time the show is aired, or by the time interested viewers complete the necessary process of application, clearance, and training.

These shows serve a triple function: they raise public awareness of the general need and of your agency's existence; they profile a particular child, thus personalizing the issue; and they move people to call for further information.

Summary

Agencies large and small can develop recruitment that involves all three types of action—general, child-specific, and targeted. Each has its value. But agencies should also:

- ❑ Accept the fact of a current crisis of families for children in need, and decide to take a pro-active, forward-looking approach.
- ❑ Assess the children needing placement using hard information, not just anecdotes and impressions.
- ❑ Study demographic information about the service area to spot potential families, and put that information together with knowledge of the children in need.

- ❑ Work to enlarge the pool of available families. For example: you can seek partnerships with nearby communities that have more of the kind of families you need. You might also expand your definition of an appropriate family.
- ❑ Use all three kinds of recruitment techniques, but stress and invest in the targeted approach.

Putting it All Together

With these goals in mind, we turn now to the everyday practices that can make this new system work.

I. That First Phone Call: Ideally, your agency should have a special phone number for prospective foster parents so that they do not get stuck in a bureaucratic telephone maze. The typical menu of button choices can intimidate or turn people off, giving an impression of a machine-like operation that is shielding itself and doesn't need or want to talk to anyone.

For all prospective foster parents, but especially for those of disadvantaged or minority status, this first call is a big step. They have thought about it for quite some time, discussing the pros and cons. They have mustered their courage to consider adding the expense and care for a troubled child to their lives, to get involved with a government or city agency, to decide to open themselves to examination. They have taken a risk, and they have hopes and concerns and many questions about what may come next.

Staff people taking the calls may need to be reminded of this on a regular basis so that they never regard the calls as routine or troublesome. The first impression of your agency, your program, and your mission will be given over the phone, so your recruiter's voice, tone, knowledge, patience, skill, and willingness to help make a big difference. Agency executives should stress the importance of this job and value the people who do it well.

The phone number should be easy to remember (for example, 2FOSTER, or 236-7837) so that all employees can pass it around. The special number should be printed on all stationery, staff business cards, recruitment training materials, flyers, posters, and so on, and on a big sign or banner in front of the agency. Since satisfied foster parents will be your best recruitment team, print up generic cards for them to give to friends and associates. And, remember, combine foster and adoption recruitment.

Each call may take 25 to 30 minutes or longer. The recruiter's explanations should not be read from a prepared sheet but rather cover a list of talking points, so that they sound conversational, not canned. Callers should not be rushed. All their questions need to be answered, which means the recruitment staff should be trained on the most commonly asked questions—not just the ones about becoming foster parents but about all aspects of the agency. Staff members can give their names, and they might ask the callers whether they would like to be addressed by their first names or more formally, as Mrs. Smith, for example.

The best recruiters respond pleasantly in a warm and enthusiastic voice, and:

- ❑ Answer all questions and concerns;
- ❑ Give their own names and phone numbers;
- ❑ Assist callers in determining their readiness to foster or adopt a child or sibling group;
- ❑ Mail an information packet to the caller within 24 hours;
- ❑ Invite the caller to pre-service training;
- ❑ Conduct a home visit within 3 to 5 days;
- ❑ Send reminder notices of training seven days before the event;
- ❑ Send a second reminder notice if the caller misses the first session;

The first impression of your agency, your program, and your mission will be given over the phone.

If the foster parents are unwilling to adopt, an effort should begin at once to find a permanent home for the child.

- Send "We Missed You" cards to callers who miss two training classes; and,
- Maintain a record on each caller for follow-up as needed.

During non-business hours, a friendly phone answering machine can be used, especially if it asks people to say in their messages the best time and place to return the call, including evenings. *Make sure the call is returned promptly*, the next day if possible. For certain communities, translators or bilingual recruiters may be very helpful. You can also have TTY equipment available for the hearing-impaired.

The people who answer the phone should be present at the first training so families have a face to put to the only name they know so far. When people are checking in, the greeter can say, "Oh, Mrs. Smith, I'm Ann Washington. I spoke to you on the phone." Such personal touches give uncertain volunteers a human connection from the very beginning and throughout the process. If a barrier or a bottleneck occurs, the personal link can make it easier to work things out, thereby retaining a potential family for a child in need.

2. The Foster/Adopt Connection: As noted above, foster parents are the ones who adopt the child in a majority of child welfare cases, once parental rights are terminated. And in the ideal case, the foster parents were recruited and their application processed with an eye to their potential as adoptive parents, so that each displaced child moves once to one permanent home. This is known as concurrent planning. The goal is one child, one home.

If it is clear after a reasonable period that the child is unlikely to be reunited with his or her birth parents, agency staff may approach the foster parents about adopting. Similarly, adoptive parents waiting for a child to be placed with them may be asked to consider

being foster parents in the meantime, or to be respite or emergency caregivers.

If the foster parents are unwilling to adopt, an effort should begin at once to find a permanent home for the child.

3. Aggressive Child-Specific Recruitment:

A written plan should be prepared for each child as soon as possible after the child enters the system. The plan will list all the options available and indicate which might be appropriate for this child, noting time frames, responsible parties, and alternative choices. A plan is especially important for youngsters who might be difficult to place. Plans should be reviewed at least monthly.

Top-quality color photographs and well-written profiles should be prepared as soon as each child moves to legally free status and preferably before. These are a kind of gentle sales tool for use in flyers, posters, ads, and presentations, and they can make a world of difference for a child or teen waiting for a family, especially at a small agency with few children to place. The flyers can be passed out at meetings or staff speeches at hospital offices, cafeterias, schools, churches, etc.

In Savannah, GA, marketing directors of local companies agreed to run the pictures and captions in their newsletters.

For the photographs...

At several **Family to Family** sites, the agency director has taken special care to make sure that children in the system, particularly those waiting for a permanent family, are photographed by professionals. Portraits of these waiting children are then framed and displayed on walls throughout the agency to remind workers and supervisors of their true purpose and real clients, as well as to attract inquiry from visitors.

Local newspapers or photography studios may be willing to donate their services, time and developing costs or do them for a reduced fee.

For the profile...

Consider engaging the volunteer or paid services of a strong professional feature writer, a retired or moonlighting journalist, or advertising agency.

The writer should schedule time to interview the youngster in person. Direct quotes from the child have an electric way of making the child come alive for the reader. If the child is too young or nonverbal, talk to the caseworker or the foster parents for personal anecdotes.

Some good questions to ask include: What do you want to be when you grow up? What are your favorite things to do when you get home from school? If I asked your best friend about you, what would he or she tell me? Who is your favorite person and why? What kind of family would you like to have? If you had one wish, what would it be?

Extra effort on the profiles will pay off. One person should have responsibility for scheduling photo and interview sessions for each child and making sure the materials are produced promptly.

4. The Power of Positive Thinking: You must be honest but you can also be tactful in referring to a child's needs or issues so as not to eliminate any chance the child might have to catch a family's interest. You won't need jargon or medical terms that people may not understand—terms like cyclothymia, enuresis, or oppositional defiant disorder.

For example: instead of saying: "...sometimes she destroys her room and wets her pants..." try: "When she becomes upset, she sometimes acts in inappropriate ways. She will need supportive parents who can provide patience and redirect her behavior."

Consider this poster about Donna, age 5:

Donna is a 5-year-old with ADHD. She has a seizure disorder and allergies that cause skin rashes, flaking, and hair loss. Donna can be oppositional and defiant. Her kindergarten teacher

reports that she won't stay in her seat. Donna is presently doing poorly in several subjects in school and has difficulty with fine motor skills. A two-parent family that can deal with Donna's behavioral problems is being sought. (And she is a fire starter.)

Would you want to adopt Donna? What if the flyer read:

Donna, Age 5 This bundle of energy is a busy young lady who likes to play school and ride her bike. She enjoys being the center of attention and is quite a performer. In school, she does well in reading, but needs extra practice writing her letters. Overall, Donna is a healthy young lady although her foster family is helping her learn to cope with allergies to cats and perfumes. Donna is eager to find a family that enjoys being active and will help her learn to perfect her handwriting. Subsidy may be available.

Wouldn't you be inclined to meet Donna and learn more about her?

In one *Family to Family* foster care/adoption training class, the above descriptions are presented as poster-sized props that include photographs of a young girl. The first profile is read aloud and class members are asked if they would be willing to have Donna in their homes. The response is always no. When the leader flips the write-up chart, she again asks about willingness to adopt Donna, and people say sure. Then she tells them they have rejected her; the trainer—she was once the child named Donna who had all these characteristics.

5. Spreading the Word: Many states are investing in development of a kind of permanent photo album as a way for potential and newly certified foster/adoptive parents to obtain profiles of children in the system who

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are legally free for adoption. New York City, for example, put on fast track the development of such an album to replace its Blue Book, in which most children and teens had the equivalent of a mug shot with a negative description of their behavior and background. The Blue Book had served more to discourage prospective foster/adoptive parents than to recruit them.

The New York City Administration for Children's Services distributed the new Family Album in a notebook to libraries, community centers, churches and private agencies. It includes a quick and easy reference sheet, Adoption from A to Z, that covers the most commonly asked questions. Every three months, the agency supplies adopted stickers to place on the pages of already adopted children, as well as new pages featuring newly available children.

In addition to top-quality write-ups and family albums, local media can be used as important partners in your effort to recruit foster and adoptive parents. Nearly all media markets have at least one television station that airs a weekly segment featuring a legally free child, often called *Wednesday's Child*. Likewise, local newspapers may be willing to run your profile as a free public service ad or for reduced rates.

You may want to include a note that the child shown is representative of those in your system and will probably be adopted by someone further along in the process than anyone who calls right after seeing the ad or program. Prospective foster/adoptive parents

may not understand that they will have to undergo four to six months of pre-service classes, screening, training, and so on before they are ready to receive a child.

Your challenge will be to help prospective parents decide if fostering or adopting is right for them based on the real children in your system. Remember, you are working to find families and homes for your children and teens, not the other way around.

At local television stations, the public affairs director is usually the best person to help you develop relationships and open doors. At newspapers in large cities, a public service representative can usually be found in the advertising department. In smaller towns you can approach the editor directly for help. As always, the personal relationships you develop with these people will pay off in the long run.

(For additional information on media relations, see the *Family to Family* tool on Strategic Communications Media Relations for Child Welfare.)

Common Roadblocks on the Path to Change

Roadblocks are aspects of an agency's program or events during it that work against the goals of the program. Some are beyond the agency's control, but most can be removed once their existence is understood. Throughout the rest of this tool, we will list common roadblocks and possible solutions for all aspects of *Family to Family*.

For example, for **foster parent recruitment**, you may find:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Recruitment messages are unclear or misleading	Identify specific groups of children in need of foster care or adoption services
Recruitment efforts don't reflect children in need of homes	Develop materials that give a clear, accurate message, reflecting agency goals and philosophy
Potential applicants become frustrated, disillusioned, and disappointed	Identify and target individuals, groups, neighborhoods, and communities capable of meeting client needs
Recruitment response is slow, impersonal, detached	Create standards for immediate personal response to inquiries
Potential parents become disinterested	Provide warm, personal, speedy response from an informed, positive, enthusiastic staff
Prospective parents feel rejected and unneeded by agency	Follow up each inquiry within 24 hours via mail, phone, or personal contact
Unscheduled or inconsistent pre-service training calendar	Offer training on an ongoing, scheduled, and frequent basis
Prospective parents vanish between recruitment contact and pre-service training	Make weekly follow-up phone calls to maintain contact and interest
Potential parents lose interest in foster care, feel wait is too long	Send training reminder notices to potential parents
Potential parents lack information about foster care/adoption	Provide interim informational group or one-on-one meetings Put prospective parents on mailing list for newsletters, etc.

T R A I N I N G

With the problems of children and youth entering foster care still escalating, foster families will find agency guidance useful throughout their involvement with the child welfare system. Foster families need *pre-service, in-service, and ongoing specialized training* to feel secure in their new job.

Small agencies can partner with others—private and public—to share recruitment phone numbers, dynamic trainers, curricula, and materials. You can develop coordinated training sessions so that potential foster parents can begin classes immediately after making an inquiry.

Pre-Service Training

These sessions begin the serious relationship between prospective foster/adoptive parents and your agency, setting the tone for what follows. Applications get filled out, basic information gets gathered, and agency staff and the hopeful parents begin to evaluate one another. The way you handle these meetings will be read as an indicator of the way you will handle everything.

Recruitment staff should schedule pre-service training to meet the needs of the families:

- Offer several options for training locations, if possible, including neighborhood settings. Hold them on public transportation routes and with plenty of free parking.
- As so many potential foster parents hold jobs during the day, a good time to have training is from 6 to 9 p.m. weeknights or on Saturday mornings. But keep in mind safety concerns of participants during the winter months when it turns dark early in the evening.
- Child care should be provided for people with pre-teens and children.
- It always helps to have coffee, soft drinks, snacks, or a light dinner available as another way of showing respect to the foster families.
- Recruitment staff should attend in order to maintain a relationship with the callers.

Pre-service training sessions are best held weekly or every other week, depending on the number of foster parents needed. For example, if your state requires 21 hours of training, you can schedule one session per week for seven weeks, three hours per training. Then schedule make-up sessions on off days, preferably once a week.

If you have a large influx of prospective foster parents, do not wait seven weeks to start another round of training. Repeat the curriculum regularly so people can be trained and supported continuously year-round. If you only start a full course every two months, you will lose people during the lag time.

In Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), Ohio, between 100-200 people attend pre-service classes each week. The child welfare agency sees pre-service training as an important tool in and of itself.

Denise Goodman is a consultant with the Department of Children and Family Services of Cuyahoga County. She has trained thousands of foster parents and trains trainers throughout Ohio and in 15 other states. In Cleveland, the agency combines foster care and adoption recruitment with pre-service training. As she recently told a **Family to Family** seminar:

*Interestingly enough, one problem we don't have is huge attrition during training. They come. They stay. They finish. They come back to makeup classes... Training is our opportunity to socialize people to the **Family to Family** philosophy and values. We don't do rules in training. We do mostly the values and philosophy, the heart part of being a foster or adoptive parent. We ask them: Are you up for the challenge? Can you do this? Do you think you can do this? So they have been thinking very hard about the responsibility.*

Recruiters sometimes bring birth parents into class. As Goodman tells her audience:

We plant a birth parent in a room and start class. We ask people why they think parents abuse and neglect their children. They say some horrible things. And we ask: Do you want to meet these people? They usually answer, no, no. We respond: Well, there is someone in this room whose children were taken away because they were using crack cocaine. Can you tell who it is? They could be sitting next to you. And of course they can't tell. And when the birth parents come up to the front, it is such a powerful moment people come on board when they see that birth parent telling how they were wandering the streets, lost their kids and couldn't believe it.

By the end of the class, new recruits are sometimes offering the birth parents toys, beds, and clothing for their children. They are already doing **Family to Family** as part of their early training.

The Application Process

At the first pre-service training session, prospective foster/adoptive parents should receive a textbook or workbook to use during class as a resource guide. Recruitment staff should be available to help the parents complete their applications. Staff who license and approve foster/adoptive families can respond to questions or concerns.

Applications are distributed and reviewed during the training to make it an interactive process, not one of just pushing papers. Basic information can be gathered through a homework packet that will be the basis of the mutual assessment process. In it will be the phone numbers of staff in the foster care unit, adoption and recruitment teams, and other key people in the agency including the director.

- Keep the training simple and straightforward. Don't let people feel they are being raked over the coals.
- Try collecting information in small pieces, starting at the first session and continuing over time. Be culturally sensitive.
- Have your recruitment team be prepared to sit down and help fill out the forms.
- Arrange mini-interviews at the training for people who have language, sight, or reading difficulties.
- During the first or second training class, you might want to have a poster size blow-up of the application form so that you can go over the basics as a group with ample time for questions. If the forms continue to be too complicated and cumbersome, the agency should revise and simplify the forms and process.

Foster families and agency staff may want to share training curricula and jointly participate in training so that they can work more effectively together.

Nothing is more important to recruitment, training, and family retention in the system than competent trainers.

Background Checks

If your state requires fingerprints or other hard-to-get information for background checks, do it as early as possible to allow bureaucratic processing time. Make it easy for new recruits:

- ❑ Have staff ready at the very first training session in a special office or private area to take families fingerprints. You can't expect anyone to take time during the workday to go to the agency or police department for this. If necessary, have staff offer to go to their homes, remembering that training may be needed to take satisfactory prints. Make sure equipment is top quality and up-to-date.
- ❑ Explain up front why background checks are necessary. Provide an easy out for those people who may not qualify due to previous convictions or arrests: let anyone come after class to a private space to share concerns they may have about any subject. Or provide personal phone numbers to allow a one-on-one conversation in a less public setting.

The Trainers

Trainers will make or break your recruiting efforts.

A good trainer makes the session riveting, informative, and fun for prospective foster/adoptive parents and even for staff members present. The room will be noisy with laughter and questions and then silent with concentration. The trainer illustrates principles and ideas with lots of real-life examples and anecdotes, some funny, some tragic. Everyone leaves energized about the future, enthusiastic about their decisions and eager to continue working and learning. They are engaged with the process.

A bad trainer drones through lists of rules and instructions, and has to pull responses like teeth from those present. Few people have questions, and the ones that do receive vague or uncertain answers or flat decrees. Some participants leave early and permanently, and everyone else leaves with misgivings about their commitment.

Nothing is more important to recruitment, training, and family retention in the system than competent trainers.

Training is hard work. Like teaching, it requires preparation, practice, and talent. Good caseworkers or agency officials may be terrible trainers, and good trainers may not necessarily be good caseworkers or executives. Too many agencies assume differently, especially when workloads are heavy and resources are limited. The temptation can be overwhelming to send in anyone available and let them wing it as a trainer by accident, hoping for the best. This will be very costly to recruitment.

- ❑ Agency leaders need to make objective assessments of all their staff people, using each person's talents to the fullest, but they should take particular care that those who conduct training have energy, expertise, cultural awareness, and enthusiasm for the task.
- ❑ Leaders should also factor into employee/trainers workload enough time to prepare materials and settings, make plans for each training session, and to clean up and follow through afterward.
- ❑ Training for trainers is crucial. Trainers need time to prepare *themselves* for the task as well as to master the material and a teaching plan.
- ❑ Agencies of every size can cooperate in finding, training, and then sharing competent trainers in joint sessions, or in funding contracts with them.

The Curriculum

Training subjects can include such issues as understanding and handling the emotional problems of children, behavior management, child development, use of community services, and ways to work with the children's parents toward reunification.

Topics covered on numerous **Family to Family** training programs include: Working with Birth Parents and their Kids; Attachment and Separation; Parenting Sexually Abused Children and Teens; Behavior Management and Discipline; Teamwork; Abuse and Neglect; and Adoptive Families.

Many excellent curricula are available. Talk to colleagues, other agencies, and state officials about recommended programs. Consider timing: some curricula are designed for use as orientation programs, while others are used as assessment tools.

It's a good idea to have agency staff share training curricula with foster/adoptive families and take part in joint training sessions. Knowing they have covered the same material together makes it easier to communicate about what's best for the children.

- Family to Family** agencies have found it highly effective to have foster parents co-lead the training program. They bring real-life expertise that is invaluable and real to the listeners. Sessions can include panels of foster/adoptive families who tell their personal stories and provide practical advice.
- Articulate teenagers and young people who have aged out of the system can also be asked to tell their stories, both successes and challenges.
- Representatives from local churches—including the One Church, One Child organization—can be invited to share the resources available in their neighborhoods.
- County executives and agency directors should be asked to participate in graduation ceremonies or closing training sessions. They can deliver a statement of thanks to the graduates.

From beginning to end of your training program, volunteers and non-bureaucrats help send the message that **Family to Family** is a team effort.

Summary

Training sessions should meet the following objectives:

- Continued recruitment;
- Orientation of prospective applicants to the agency's programs and philosophy;
- Development of awareness of foster/adoptive parenting issues;
- Creation of a cadre of advocates for children;
- Initiation of the self-screening process; and
- Positive public relations.

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A core curriculum based on these objectives is now being used throughout Ohio. Lists of training programs are available through the Child Welfare League of America, and from others. However, your final curriculum should be developed locally, with these principles in mind:

- Use solid adult learning theories;
- Emphasize the philosophy and values of **Family to Family** caregiving rather than rules and regulations;
- Be interactive and participatory. Do not lecture or preach to people;
- Use audiovisuals and handouts;
- Provide fun and excitement;
- Stay committed to the best possible recruitment, training, and support programs; and
- Use great trainers.

While the quality of a curriculum is important, it is not nearly as critical as its presentation by top trainers.

This **Family to Family** recruitment and training tool is not meant to replace existing training programs. Rather, it is intended to help integrate the values of **Family to Family** into your existing program and make it more effective and useful.

Family to Family agencies have found it highly effective to have foster parents co-leading the training program.

Roadblocks

Obstacles that may occur during Pre-Service Training:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Attrition during training process	Have great trainers!
Lack of convenient time and/or location	Provide fun, interactive, user-friendly, stimulating training based on the principles of adult learning
Loss of enthusiasm	Have ample staff available to answer questions or concerns personally with participants
Heightened fear and anxiety	Vary time, day, and location to accommodate parents
Potential parents feel lost in the process	Track attendance and offer opportunities to make up missed sessions
Potential parents feel overwhelmed or inadequate	Use training as an opportunity to begin mutual assessment and information gathering process
	Stage a Graduation Ceremony with director as the guest speaker

Obstacles that may arise during the Application Process:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Failure to turn in application materials	Offer one-on-one assistance to complete application
Unreadiness to apply	Provide additional information about foster care
Difficulty with reading and writing	Follow up with phone calls
Paperwork is too cumbersome	Send out new application packet with return postage envelope
	Schedule home visit by recruitment staff
	Maintain tracking list to follow up

The Pre-Assessment Phase

During the 30- to 60-day pre-service training program, the pre-assessment phase begins. Prospective foster/adoptive parents complete the application and agency staff members analyze it carefully. Each applicant's file generally includes reference letters from employers and personal friends, family fact sheets and criminal record checks, along with other information.

During this process, applicants should receive phone calls from the recruitment staff at least every 30 days until placement to make sure they know they are being served. The recruitment staff should be available to solve problems and provide advocacy for the applicants as they move through the assessment process.

Ideally, prospective foster parents will feel a seamless continuum of support and services from their first day in the system. They will see themselves as part of an enthusiastic, hardworking and competent team in which they are critical players.

1. The Mutual Assessment Process: This is the point at which applicants, foster/adoptive care licensing workers and recruitment staff work together to assess the potential foster/adoptive parents' placement prospects. The idea of *Family to Family* mutual assessment

is not so much to screen people out of the system as to enable all sides to see clearly whether placement will or will not work. Every applicant can play a useful role in achieving your agency's mission.

Try to focus on the strengths of each potential foster/adoptive parent. Someone who may not be ready or is legally ineligible for fostering/adopting may still have valuable abilities that you can put to work for children in need. Make an effort to find those abilities—the person may not recognize his or her own worth.

These people include volunteer families in too-small housing units, people in recovery from substance abuse or other trauma, or people not married long enough or recently divorced.

Put them to work as community volunteers, respite workers, office assistants, tutors, mentors to a teen as big brothers/sisters, babysitters, and assistant recruiters. You can find a place that suits each individual. Try not to turn anyone away completely.

2. Dealing With Reluctance: Foster/adoptive care applicants may be reluctant to work with the child's birth family, fearing threats or abuse from people they perceive as violent,

The ideal is that when a family has completed the approval and training process and is ready to receive a child, the child arrives within two weeks.

unstable, or otherwise dangerous. Some staff members too may resist the new approach. Additional preparation then becomes necessary.

Through the placement process, family services staff will become clear on the right match between foster families and birth families.

- Staff leaders can explain that most children have families except in a very few cases the death of parents or abandonment and that the child's future mental and social health will benefit if he or she is able to come to terms with that family.
- Honesty is required. It is unrealistic for a foster/adoptive family to think that complete anonymity might ever be possible. Coincidence often brings people together, and a determined searcher can usually locate anyone. Effort instead to build a positive relationship with the birth family can forestall enormous pain and anxiety.
- All families have value, but applicants and some staff members may need help in seeing the need for strength-based assessments and in making them on their own.
- Fears and worries need to be stated and explored directly and individually. With the foster parents, develop contingency plans for what to do in case each fear materializes, no matter how improbable. Such plans build confidence and defuse worry.
- Stress that regular contact involves ground rules for everyone's behavior and incentives for the birth family to observe those rules.
- Point out that the birth family members have fears too that they will be excluded from their child's life, that the child will love the foster family more and want to stay there; that they are contemptible or disgusting in the foster family's eyes and will become so in the eyes of the child.
- Many birth families feel intense guilt and shame about the foster family's ability to provide the security, material goods, or care that they did not.
- Set up "buddy families" of two or more foster/adoptive families to share experiences and discuss fears and solutions to similar problems.

If these approaches are ineffective, you may have to counsel prospective foster parents out of the regular program. But try to use them instead in emergency foster care, respite care, babysitting, or in caring for children whose birth parents are out of the picture.

3. Completing Licensing – Filling in the Pre-Placement Gaps: An important lesson of *Family to Family* experience is that time spent waiting is time that irritates. When prospective foster parents are required to wait too long and struggle through a bureaucratic maze in order to foster children and help their parents, they become discouraged and lose interest.

Your goal should be to have all the necessary paperwork, training, home study, and certification approval completed at the time a family is ready to accept children. The ideal is that when a family has completed the approval and training process and is ready to receive a child, the child arrives within two weeks.

A long intervening period is likely to cause waiting families anxiety and impatience. However long it is, your agency should be in frequent touch with them during this time. You can direct them to further training, offer reading material, and help them network with other foster

parents. Calls from staff or visits from neighborhood service providers are good. Some families will need and want more personal contact from you than others. The idea is to make sure none of them feel neglected, ignored, or taken for granted. If they do, they may get discouraged and quit.

Some tips:

- ❑ Set deadlines for staff work on returning phone calls, assigning assessments, obtaining fingerprints, and so on, to assure accountability.
- ❑ Let staff provide information (manuals, a videotape on policies, etc.), continued orientation and support to applicants during interviews and home visits rather than in a group setting, if the family seems to need more personalized support.
- ❑ Agency workers might help applicants meet safety regulations by arranging and even paying for minor home repairs, smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, medical exams, beds, cribs, furniture, and other equipment needed to care for the child.

When Do Gaps Occur?	
<i>Between</i>	<i>and</i>
The first call	Orientation
Orientation	Pre-service training
Training	Application
Application	Assessment
Assessment	Approval
Approval	Placement

The best agencies keep track of the numbers of prospective families they lose in each of these periods. Large losses in a given gap period cause changes in agency practice for that part of the work.

Roadblocks that may surface during the assessment process:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Prospects withdraw application/drop out of process	Monthly follow-up phone call from recruitment staff
Potential parent feels lost in the system	Home visit by recruitment staff
Potential parent feels disrespected, not needed by agency	Strict standards for timely assessment process
Assessment process takes too long; prospect loses interest	Mutual assessment with prospective parent
	Mutual assessment training for foster care staff
	Exit interview of dropouts by recruitment department
	Re-contact of dropouts by recruitment department in six months

Some families will need and want more personal contact from you than others.

Roadblocks in the Post-Assessment/Pre-Placement Process:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Foster parent gives up waiting for a child	Monthly tracking call from recruitment department until placement
Feels unwanted or unneeded by agency	Monthly contact from foster home resource manager
Begins to distrust agency	Invite foster parent to Foster Parent Association meeting
Loses enthusiasm	Invite foster parent to monthly cluster meeting
	Send foster parent the training calendar
	Discuss broader age/characteristics with foster parent
	Encourage foster parent to provide emergency or respite care

The Placement of the Child

Through the placement process, family services staff members will become clear on the right match between foster families and birth families. Then they can work with the foster families on a regular basis to prepare them for the arriving children.

Steps of the child placement process:

- Workers gather as much information as possible about the birth family, the circumstances of removal and the personality of the child, such as food likes and dislikes, play and school habits, toys, etc. These case notes are written up and given to the foster parents.
- Official documents – the state's official child information form, a letter authorizing Medicaid services, medical information, and so on are given to the foster family along with information about securing medical care, clothing orders, vouchers, and other social services.
- Foster parents also receive basic life books to assist the child in recording information and dealing with separation issues.
- Staff people visit the foster home within a week of placement to review child care notes and forms and to begin linking the foster family with available services.
- A visit between the child and his or her birth parents is planned as soon as possible, with all arrangements made in advance: transportation, site, timing, participants, etc.

Roadblocks that may appear when you work at Placing the Child:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Crisis in care for the child and/or family	Monthly home visit from agency staff 24-hour emergency hotline
Lack of support or cooperation from worker/agency	Medicaid hotline to secure medical services
Foster parent feels frustration, disappointment, disillusionment	Calls and visits from child's social worker Regular training opportunities for foster parents
Foster parent feels used and unappreciated	Monthly cluster support groups Family preservation services for crisis situations
Foster parent believes that the worker/agency does not value or respect caregivers	Foster care ombudsman to advocate for foster parent
Foster parent is unprepared to meet the child's special needs	Foster parents are invited to all meetings, reviews, and case conferences Social worker/resource manager responds within 24 hours Foster parents have phone numbers of supervisors, chiefs, and administrators Staff and foster parents are trained in teamwork Complete, accurate information is given continually to foster parents

S U P P O R T I N G F O S T E R F A M I L I E S

Support provided to foster families can be the reason why they stay in the program, and lack of support is often the reason why they quit. Too frequently agencies beg for foster families to join in their effort to care for abused children and then treat them very badly.

Here is a typical horror story:

Late one night, agency representatives drop off several scared and bedraggled children at the foster home, their clothes stuffed in garbage bags. The harried workers don't provide even the most basic information about the children. The next morning the family discovers that the glasses of one youngster were broken in the move. Calls to the agency are not returned. Only after days of talking to machines does the family get a human being to respond, but the worker says nothing can be done until various forms are processed. After a great deal more of such treatment, the family drops out of foster care.

Elements of Support

Strong support programs and staff provide foster families with the following seven things: appreciation, respect, caregiving assistance, crisis services, professional development, emotional support, and personal involvement.

Appreciation: Many foster parents feel unappreciated and under-recognized for the important work they do. Since they are not paid for their time and effort but only reimbursed for expenses, it is imperative that your agency express appreciation and recognize their invaluable contributions.

- Recognize individual foster parents (with their permission) in your church announcements, news releases, stories in agency newsletters, fliers, and releases offered to company newsletters, etc.
- Say a simple thank you on little sticky notes attached to routine notices, with a thank-you card for special efforts, with follow-up phone calls after meetings, etc.
- Remember birthdays, anniversaries, mother's day, and father's day with calls or cards.
- Hold special events for foster families picnics, parties, barbecues, ice cream socials.
- Send each family a personal letter of appreciation from your agency director.

Respect: Caregivers may resign if they feel they are regarded as interchangeable babysitters-for-hire or otherwise disrespected by staff and administrators. Your agency should not only express but feel respect for caregivers' irreplaceable role in your work.

- Return all phone calls as soon as possible.
- Make sure your staff is trained to understand and support the foster parent role.
- Ensure that the staff is culturally competent, to avoid giving unknowing offense. Do not talk down to any caregiver.
- Set appointments at times convenient for the foster family, and make sure the staff is prompt. Delays or cancellations should be followed with a call or note of explanation and apology.

- Use proper formal social etiquette. Ask the caregiver's preference for terms of address: first name or Mr. Brown; Miss, Mrs. or Ms.
- Practice listening fully to foster parents concerns and issues, even when you understand from their first few words what the problem is and how to solve it. Avoid interrupting.

Caregiving assistance: Parenting children who have been abused, neglected, and sexually or chemically victimized is a far cry from caring for the orphaned dirty child of past service agency history. Foster children now come with multiple needs and foster parents need help in coping.

Most foster parents dip into their own financial resources to care for a child. When the demands of caregiving exceed available resources, the parents may quit to avoid providing what they regard as inadequate care. Your agency can help extend their resources in many ways.

- Offer as many free items as possible: books, toys, clothing, bedding, transportation, and other services.
- Return phone calls as soon as possible.
- Offer respite or day care for the children to give the foster parents a break before they are driven to request it.
- Identify community resources and help set up links to them.
- Provide the frequent words of encouragement or pep talks that often mean more to foster parents than money.
- Seek out tutors to help children with schoolwork.
- Make sure the foster parents have affordable liability insurance, medical cards for the children, and lists of good care providers.
- Reimburse expenses as soon as possible. Have funds available to supply emergency needs, and make access easy for vouchers or other cash equivalents.

- Set up a warmline that foster parents can call with questions about parenting these special children.
- Offer in-home training sessions for special caregiving issues.

Crisis services: Given the complex problems that children now bring to foster care, it is not surprising that crises occur. Emotional or behavioral challenges may emerge at any time and should be regarded as predictable events. When foster parents feel isolated and alone, they quit. Your agency can provide services for these highly emotional moments.

- Return phone calls as soon as possible.
- Guarantee 24-hour, seven-days-a-week access to the agency, and offer multiple ways to gain that access.
- Offer family preservation services, dispute mediation services and legal service access.
- Support the foster family against a child's initial allegations of mistreatment until the matter can be investigated.
- Maintain contact with the foster family to provide emotional support after a foster child's departure.

Professional development: Today's foster parents are providing care for children who would have been in institutions in the past. Few foster parents are prepared for such children. Education and training are therefore essential components of any family retention program, as foster parents may quit if they feel they cannot cope with the youngsters. Agencies need careful work to develop and educate caregivers adequately.

- Train staff members and foster parents together in order to help forge the bonds among them that shared experiences provide.
- Offer real life training opportunities to all caregivers.
- Use experienced foster parents as trainers and support group leaders, and as mentors to new caregivers.

Emotional or behavioral challenges may emerge at any time and should be regarded as predictable events.

*Goods
and services
donated
by local
businesses
involve
another
important
partnership.*

- Set up developmental education as a continuing process.
- Offer per-diem compensation to foster parents commensurate with their training and experience.
- Provide mutual ongoing assessment and discussion of foster parents' training needs.

Emotional support: Many foster parents say no one understands their problems, concerns, and stresses. Friends and family offer useless advice, and sometimes the caregiver must defend the decision to foster. Specialized and responsive support is critical to retain these foster parents.

- Return phone calls as soon as possible.
- Set up buddy-family or mentor-family programs among fostering families to let them share advice and experiences with their peers.
- Cluster support groups for geographic areas or special child care issues.
- Ensure regular in-home contact with a social worker.
- Offer easy access to professional counseling services.

Personal involvement: Feelings of isolation or of being cogs in a bureaucratic wheel often lead to foster parents' departure from the system. Caregivers should be treated as the important members they are of the team serving the child and family. Including them in agency policy and program planning insures that their needs as well as the children's needs will be served.

- Include foster parents in policy and program development and planning.
- Build foster parent associations and encourage them to engage in advocacy for the needs of foster parents and children.
- Include foster parents in all planning for their child's care and for activities such as birth-family visitation, service delivery, etc.

- Invite foster parents to court hearings, case reviews, case conferences, meetings, etc.
- Give foster parents a copy of the individual plan for the child in their care.
- Ask successful foster parents to help train new foster parents and staff members.
- Include foster parents in all recruitment activities where possible.

Reimbursement

Although money cannot be the primary motivator for foster parents, reimbursement levels should reflect the difficulty and demands of fostering, as well as covering the actual costs of caring for a child—initial costs, medical care, and travel for birth-family visits included.

If the child clearly is not going back to his or her birth family, finding a permanent home through adoption, legal guardianship, or kinship care becomes a top priority. The potential loss of foster care payments cannot be a reason for a family to keep a child in a temporary status like foster care. Children and teens need loving, stable and permanent families and a place to call home.

Foster Parent/Agency/Community Partnerships

Family to Family sites often wanted to rethink their relationships with individuals, foster parents, associations, and support groups. For example, some agencies provide special financial grants to local foster parent associations for publication of newsletters, annual picnics and special events, and travel to national conventions and state meetings. Others provide in-kind services like facilitating better foster parent/agency partnerships, computer support, and communications links to foster families.

Respite care services for foster parents who need a weekend break were developed in several **Family to Family** sites. They included sleepovers for the children and teens supervised by agency staff. Child care and after-

school services are lifesavers for employed foster parents, particularly those who are single.

In rural areas, workers may need to create resources where few present themselves. Churches may help recruit foster grandparents to offer respite care. A local miniature golf course, library, recreation center, or other business might offer part-time jobs or special afternoon events to provide older youngsters with after-school options.

Goods and services donated by local businesses involve another important partnership. Owners of local sports teams can be asked to donate tickets to basketball or baseball games as special foster family events. Local movie houses can provide free tickets; department stores can be tapped for shoes, clothing, and other vouchers. Local restaurants often will donate free meals or desserts as a special treat.

To be truly effective, **Family to Family** teams—the agency staff (both family service and placement workers), foster family, children, and birth parents—need always to be singing from the same page. A foster parent from Savannah, GA summed up **Family to Family** and captured the true spirit of reform:

*It's true, it's a whole new way of thinking.
And it's almost inevitable that this was
going to occur because we had changed
the way we do child welfare anyway. If it
continues in the direction that it's going
now, I think it will blossom very well,
because it gets everybody in the neigh-
borhood involved: it's not going to be just
the social workers doing it, or **Family to
Family** workers doing it. Hopefully, it's
going to be neighbors doing it, working
with the **Family to Family**.*

Agency staff will do best if they too sing from the same page. Foster families can feel the same sense of support and caring from newly

assigned family service workers as they did from the recruitment and training staff. It's a good idea for your social workers to attend the same training programs so that they know the foster families' expectations.

Other Techniques of Family Support

General approaches:

- Staff members conduct monthly visits with foster families caring for children under age six to identify training needs and solve problems.
- Staff members make regular contact with foster parents caring for children over age six (e.g., bi-monthly home visits with phone contact on alternate months).
- Family services worker has monthly contact with foster parents to advocate, solve problems, secure/share additional information, provide one-to-one education, etc.
- Recruitment staff people produce a regular newsletter, mailed to all foster parents, updating them on events, training, changes in policy and procedure, etc.
- Neighborhood-based and special-issue discussion cluster groups are set up, facilitated by foster parents, and supported by the agency, to offer education, training, and mutual support to foster parents.
- Workers include foster parents as part of the team, invite them to all meetings, and facilitate communication between them and all team members.
- Staff people assist foster parents in obtaining WIC and other program services.
- Workers provide transportation, crisis intervention, and problem-solving services to families as needed.
- Foster parents have a 24-hour emergency phone number to use in crisis situations. They also have phone listings to go up the chain of command to the Office of the Director with any unresolved problems.

Team members will want to help the birth parents feel they are part of the team and not on the “hot seat.”

- Key staff team members attend all meetings with the foster parents.
- Staff members schedule case conferences on disruptions, notifying all parties.
- Key staff people serve as liaison (and mediate conflicts) between foster parents and agency.
- Up to 45 days of family preservation counseling services are available to assist families, both birth and foster families, in crisis.

In neighborhoods:

- Family services workers provide support, training, and networking with other foster parents, and identify neighborhood-based service providers and respite care.
- The Foster Parent Association, organized and facilitated by foster parents (and supported by the agency), provides education, training, advocacy, and mutual support.
- Special training is offered both on- and off-site in working with the child's birth family.
- Quarterly training calendar is given to each foster parent, who is invited to attend at will.
- Training classes at a variety of skill levels are held on various topics weekdays, afternoons, evenings, and on Saturdays, both on-site and in neighborhood centers.
- Foster parents are encouraged to complete 60 plus hours of core training designed to provide in-depth knowledge and skills to any caregiver.

- Foster parents unable to complete training requirements with the classes may use in-home training modules instead.
- The Family Visits Center offers a safe setting for foster and birth families and children to visit.
- Transportation is provided to foster parents on an as-needed basis for birth family visits, counseling and other services.
- The agency offers foster parents educational materials, books and community resources.
- Financial support for child care is provided to employed foster parents.
- Foster parents may receive an add-on board rate to assist them in meeting a child's special needs.

Building Those Bridges

Family to Family sites use the concept of a four-part bridge to symbolize the process by which foster/adoptive families and a child's birth parents grow to span the gap between them. Each stage involves an increased degree of personal contact. We offer lists of tips below to ease passage through the stages by social workers, foster families, and birth families alike.

Stage One: basic contact. All parties should understand this stage from the beginning as the minimum expected of them in taking part in the system and in maintaining a relationship with the child. **Family to Family** workers sometimes refer to this stage as the name but no face period; each side learns about the other but no personal meetings occur.

Tips that social workers can use:

- Encourage information exchange between birth parents and foster parents
- Have everyone exchange pictures
- Talk positively about each set of parents to the other set
- Schedule regular and frequent visitation
- Arrange phone contact between the two sets of parents
- Share all information with all four parents
- Encourage foster parents to host sibling visits
- Serve as liaison between the sets of parents
- Describe foster parents in non-identifying terms at placement
- Exchange monthly progress reports with both sets of parents
- Serve as a positive role model to all the adults
- Assist everyone in understanding cultural differences

Tips that foster parents can use:

- Exchange letters and pictures with the child's family via the social worker
- Call the child's parent on the phone and talk openly with child about family
- Request pictures of the child's family to display in child's room
- Send the parents current pictures of the child
- Share copies of homework and report cards with the family
- Send a snack or an activity for the child's visits to the parents
- Encourage the parents' progress and brag to the parent about the child
- Dress child up for visits
- Share monthly progress reports
- Host or arrange sibling visits
- Request cultural information

Tips that birth parents can use:

- Send cards, letters, and family pictures to the child via the social worker
- Attend all visits/meetings
- Attend all classes/appointments
- Make regular contact with the social worker
- Plan special activities for visits from the child
- Remember the child's birthday and holidays with special gifts or events
- Talk with the child about the separation, expressing your own feelings and encouraging expression by the child
- Write down important information about child such as diet, routine, habits, etc.
- Send medical/school/etc. records to the foster family via the social worker
- Encourage the child to cooperate with placement, be polite, obey the foster parents, etc.
- Share critical cultural information with the foster parents

Stage Two: meetings on neutral territory. This stage enhances and builds a supportive relationship between the two sets of parents that will benefit both them and the children. It requires advance planning by social workers and sometimes involves much anxiety on everyone's part. Meetings typically occur at agency offices, play spaces, or neighborhood recreation or social centers.

Tips that social workers can use:

- Ask foster and birth parents at placement if they would like to meet
- Ensure that both sets of parents attend agency planning and preliminary meetings
- Facilitate cross-family conversations
- Encourage the two families to work on the child's life book together
- Encourage birth parents to permit foster parents to call them at home
- Set clear boundaries for contact
- Facilitate the development of a collaborative relationship between the two sets of parents
- Brief foster parents on birth parents' fears, problems/needs
- Participate in visits
- Talk openly with all about their concerns
- Help each set of parents understand the problems of the other set

Tips that foster parents can use:

- Consider meeting the child's family at the time of placement
- Transport the child to the visit site
- Talk with the parents at the visit about the child's food preferences, school progress, play experiences, etc.
- Encourage the parent to phone child at your home
- Maintain non-threatening attitude
- Refer to birth parent's child as "your child"
- Share parenting information
- Attend staff meetings, team meetings, and reviews
- Help the parents find community resources
- Encourage/assure reunification
- Share child's life book with parents
- Attend training to learn how to work directly with birth parents
- Learn about, understand, and respect the birth parents' culture

Tips birth parents can use:

- Discuss child's activities with the foster family at visits
- Share family information with the foster parents
- Arrange phone calls to you from the child
- Work to develop a positive relationship with the foster family
- Talk with the foster parents at agency meetings
- Give the foster parents your home phone number
- Attend school meetings with foster parents
- Help develop the child's life book
- Include foster parents in activities during the child's visits with you
- Avoid making unrealistic scenarios for the child's future
- Avoid giving child a specific date for family reunification
- Learn about, understand, and respect the foster parents' culture

Stage Three: visits to the birth family's home. This stage begins direct collaboration between the families to ensure the best outcome for the child. It brings the foster parents to a place they may fear, and exposes the birth parents to possible negative reactions or opinions of their lifestyle from the foster family. Tension is likely.

Tips that social workers can use:

- Assist the birth parents in welcoming the foster family
- Encourage the foster parents to transport the child personally to the home
- Permit the foster family to invite the birth parents to attend all appointments
- Encourage the foster parents to transport birth parents to agency meetings and child's appointments
- Encourage foster parents to let the birth family call the child at the foster home
- Assist in managing and resolving any tension or conflict at the visit

Tips that foster parents can use:

- Attend parenting classes with parents
- Cooperate with birth parents in setting visit arrangements and timing
- Take/pick up child to/at parents' home
- Serve as parents' mentor and role model
- Review child's visits with parents
- Give parents verbal progress reports
- Ask parent to come to doctor or other care appointments
- Volunteer to transport the birth parents to meetings and appointments

Tips that birth parents can use:

- Phone child at the foster home; talk with the foster parents too
- Invite the foster parents to the child's birthday party or other celebrations
- Discuss the case plan progress with the foster parents
- Review the child's behavior with the foster parents
- Invite the foster parents to attend parenting classes with you
- Ask the foster parents for help in locating community resources
- Invite the foster parents to your home

Stage Four: the birth family visits the child at the foster family's home. This is the "come to my house" stage, the final, most intimate part of the families' relationship. When such visits become routine, the two families have built the bridge that will sustain the child's relationship with both families that care for him or her, and the birth parents will have begun assuming responsibility for parenting their child.

Tips that social workers can use:

- Discuss with both sets of parents how foster parents can help support the birth parents
- Empower foster parents to set limits and boundaries for contact and visits
- Assist the foster parents in welcoming the birth parents
- Allow the families involved to schedule all visits
- Encourage continuing contact between the families after the child is reunited
- Suggest that foster parents provide respite care for the birth family after reunification

Tips that foster parents can use:

- Invite child's family to attend school programs
- Invite child's family to your home
- Assist in planning child's return to birth home
- Serve as support to family following reunification
- Offer to provide respite care
- Include the birth parents in farewell and transition activities, making the event a celebration

Tips the birth parents can use:

- Offer to take child to appointments for the foster parents
- Work with the foster parents to solve school problems and include the foster parents in holiday celebrations
- Show appreciation to the foster parents
- Work with the foster parents to resolve any discipline problems on either side
- Call the foster parents for help with parenting problems
- Include foster parents in celebrations over the child's return home
- Allow the child to keep in contact with the foster parents after your family is reunited

Family Team Meetings

The Family Team Meeting is an important tool for building bridges. It is usually held in a neighborhood location convenient to the parents and foster parents. It brings together all the people who will be involved in the process of reuniting the family, and occurs after the case staff meeting where decisions for custody have been made.

It can be an opportunity to begin building the bridge that is the goal for the two families' relationship. In this way, parent and caregiver can discuss and work out what is expected of them. This meeting ideally takes place within three days of placement.

The social worker of record calls and conducts the meeting. The discussion can center on the needs, safety, and comfort of the child and of all parties involved, recognizing that both families are important to the child and that the child will benefit from both sets of parents working cooperatively.

Team members will want to help the birth parents feel they are part of the team and not on the hot seat. They need to have a part and a say in what is happening to their children. Likewise, foster parents can be encouraged to engage in discussion with the parents and social worker.

It's a good idea to invite the following people to at least the first team meeting:

- Parents of the child
- The affected child/children
- Neighborhood site coordinator (if applicable)
- Caregiver/foster family
- Foster home resource manager
- Others with significant involvement with the family

Using the tips above (*Building Those Bridges*), families can begin to share thoughts and feelings about the children, their care, and activities associated with them.

Some examples of possible issues are: the plan for frequency of visits; when visits occur; who will be there; who transports whom; what the children should call the foster parents; needs such as clothing, medical appointments, and favorite toys; what cereal or foods the child likes; what things cause fear; whether sleep comes with the light off or on; school issues/needs; birthday parties; general behavior of the child and how that is managed; discipline; sibling relationships; bedtimes; and favorite TV shows or books.

Remember, the Family Team Meeting is intended to:

- Create a continuum of care and familiar things that will reduce trauma to the child.
- Nurture a relationship between the parent and foster caregiver so that the child feels supported by both parents and foster parents while in placement.

When the child returns home, the relationship between all involved parties will, ideally, continue, perhaps in the form of occasional child and respite care, child rearing advice, holiday gatherings, or extended family activity.

Special Support for Seasoned Foster Parents

In addition to recruiting new foster parents, *Family to Family* sites have worked to provide additional training and support for their current foster families. As outlined above, the values of *Family to Family* can be stressed at these sessions.

Some families may resist adopting the new approach, finding it hard to drop old attitudes of hostility and suspicion toward birth families. A few—and a few staff people too—may refuse to try. (See *Dealing with Reluctance*, page 27.)

But don't expect most families to be surprised by the new approach. As one worker pointed out: Our families are doing it anyway—they just don't tell us.

Throughout this tool, we have discussed the “cycle of recruitment,” stressing that recruitment, training, certification, support, and retention are all dependent upon each other.

An effective family foster care system encourages foster parents to continue their involvement with the child and family after reunification.

It’s on Videotape!

Family to Family trainers often use an effective video clip by Dr. Patricia Minuchin of conversations with foster and birth parents. As one *Family to Family* proponent described the video:

The foster parents told us this was one of the most powerful pieces of our training. It is just raw footage of foster parents sitting together, talking about how they have engaged natural parents it brought tears to our eyes. It was very emotional. One of the foster parents talked about this parent that she had been working with, and the mother had taken the children and left New York. However, she contacted the foster parent when she came back and the foster mother is still in contact with the girl and her mother. They established a relationship. The mother realized that the foster parents had become her friend and really cared about her. I believe that reunification occurs quicker if we are all working together, and I believe that is the purpose of Family to Family.

Roadblocks

As with all other activities, roadblocks do appear during Pre-Reunification of Child or Placement of Child with Relatives or Adoptive Family. These include:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Foster parents aren t involved in case planning	Invite foster parent personally to participate in case planning, meetings, etc.
Foster parent does not agree with placement plan	Train all staff people and foster parents in teamwork
Foster parent feels left out, not valued, disrespected, betrayed	Invite foster parents to monthly cluster support group
Foster parent is unable to support the case plan	Invite them to Foster Parent Association meetings Include foster parent in work with birth parent, relative, or adoptive family Involve foster parent in family visits Make monthly home visit Ensure that foster parent has regular contact with service providers and the child s social worker Provide information to foster parent on progress of child s family

Lasting Connections

An effective family foster care system encourages foster parents to continue their involvement with the child and family after reunification. Family foster parents, not unlike godparents, aunts and uncles, can be encouraged to remain available as resources to provide information about the child, as support, and for respite.

Permanency through reunification of the birth family means that:

- Family services team assists foster parents with grief issues when a child returns to his or her family.
- Family services worker facilitates the transition from the foster home to the child's own home.
- Family services worker negotiates post-placement contact between the foster parents and the birth parents.
- Financial assistance is available to assist foster parents in maintaining an ongoing relationship with the child and his/her own family.

Permanency through adoption by foster parents or kinship care means that:

- Staff shares assessment information with adoption staff to facilitate the adoption process.
- Foster parents attend adoption orientation sessions arranged by recruitment staff.
- Recruitment staff fingerprints foster parent(s) at special adoption training.
- Family services worker provides foster parents with additional information about the child's background and history.
- Agency workers provide foster parents information on adoption process.
- Workers advocate for foster parents during the adoption process.
- Agency staff members conduct mutual assessment for adoptive placement.

Possible roadblocks after reunification or adoption:

Common Roadblocks	Possible Solutions
Agency/worker does not recognize foster parents feelings of loss	Monthly contact by agency staff Training on dealing with grief and loss
Foster family feels left out, frustrated, disenchanted, hurt	Invitation to monthly cluster support group Invitation to Foster Parent Association meeting
Foster parent is angry at agency/worker	Post-reunification contact with child and family Review of placement progress by agency staff and foster parent Ongoing training for foster parent and staff Next-day phone call to foster parent from worker to assist with grief and loss

Throughout this tool, we have discussed the cycle of recruitment, stressing that recruitment, training, certification, support, and retention are all dependent upon each other. The success of your program rests on this foundation. Attached is a chart that can help explain these interlocking activities.

N E X T S T E P S

Asking the Right Questions

You may be asking, So where do we begin? In *Family to Family*, we have found that rethinking recruitment, training, and support programs is not easy. In most agencies, it involves many different departments and an array of supervisors and professional staff.

No quick fix or one-size-fits-all recruitment/training/support program exists. Each agency is different and the needs of large inner-city systems will differ from those in suburban or rural areas. Here are some questions to ask that will help you get started.

Q: Who are the children needing care?

A: Get general and collective information about your locality's potential and actual children in need. This should be readily available from the Census Bureau, town annual reports, monthly statistical reports, etc. These documents describe the people in each census tract: income levels, racial and educational composition, number of people per household, rental or owned housing, number and type of businesses, etc.

Get specific data on each child coming into your system. The information you'll need includes: age, race/ethnicity, special needs, home zip code or neighborhood, sibling placements vs. split sibling groups, family characteristics, length of time in care, and case plan goals.

From this information you can draw up groupings and a profile of the kinds of children for whom you need to secure foster, adoptive, or kinship homes now and in the near future.

Q: What kinds of caregivers do we need?

A: Define them in terms of the children. Review the general characteristics of foster parents already successful with the children in your system: their occupation, family composition, age, race, education, etc. Then ask them questions:

- What drew you to the idea of foster/adoptive parenting?
- What has made you stay committed to foster/adoptive parenting?
- What has been the most helpful thing we've done for you? The least helpful?
- What recreational or social activities do you participate in?
- What community or neighborhood clubs or activities are you involved in?

Such information can help you develop a profile for spotting more such caregivers for your specific needs.

But don't reject or overlook people who don't fit the profile. It's just a starting point for you and tells you nothing about individuals. Look for the strengths and possibilities of every potential foster/adoptive parent. As your program expands, your profile of successful families will grow too.

Q: Where do we find these people?

A: Use your profile information. Note where your successful parents live, where they work, where they spend a lot of time. Ask them questions that you can use to find more people like them:

- How did you learn about foster/adoptive parenting?
- What attracted you about that message?
- What TV or radio programs do you regularly tune in to? What newspapers do you regularly read?
- Do you know other families who might be interested in foster/adoptive parenting?
- Would you help us recruit suitable people?

Don't hesitate to ask successful foster parents if they would like to repeat the experience, or if they would consider adopting.

This information will assist you in focusing your recruitment campaign on individuals who are likely to be motivated to foster/adopt your agency's children. Again, don't forget that profiles are only general guides. For some special children you will want to do child-specific recruitment of families with particular characteristics.

Q: How do we develop and implement a recruitment plan?

A: Form a committee. Setting up a group of staff, caregivers, community volunteers, and others involved in your system will make sure it's appropriate and useful, and will give everyone a sense of owning the plan that results.

Set a deadline for producing the plan.

Planning time should be limited—you don't want to spend all your time planning instead of recruiting!

Plan for a year's work. Recruitment plans should be developed annually and must be based on the children in your system and on the profile of your prospective caregivers. The plan should include steps for planning large activities and include the names of responsible parties for each element.

Keep a monthly calendar. Take advantage of already-scheduled meetings of community organizations and neighborhood events and send your flyers and speakers there. The calendar should be distributed monthly to all staff, to encourage their contributions to it, and should reflect any last-minute revisions or changes.

Develop a targeted monthly media campaign. Use the newspapers, television, and radio stations your most successful caregivers use. Send different messages to different groups.

Use the personal touch. Organize family parties, recruitment parties in neighborhood centers, speaking engagements, etc. Set an agency-wide goal of at least one personal contact per staff person per week.

Raise public awareness. General recruitment activities fit best during Foster Care Month (May) and Adoption Month (November)

when you can simultaneously recognize current caregivers and educate the community about your programs.

Q: How well does our training program prepare our caregivers?

A: Ask those involved in it. These are: 1) new graduates of the training program; 2) existing caregivers; 3) foster care/adoption staff; and 4) program dropouts.

Training can make or break your entire program. Pre-service training serves the purpose of orienting prospective parents to the agency. It facilitates the recruitment process by providing applicants with information to help them decide whether to proceed or withdraw. It also helps determine whether new foster parents will be successful and thus whether they will remain in your system to foster again.

You can distribute a training evaluation questionnaire at the end of training. It should focus on whether the training program was or was not helpful in making the decision about becoming a foster/adoptive parent. This provides a short-term assessment.

You can set up a focus group or survey of existing foster parents to assess the long-term impact of your training program—perhaps with all foster parents at their first recertification and with adoptive parents at finalization. This evaluation would focus on whether the training provided them with the knowledge and skills they needed to begin caregiving.

While a mailed survey may be easier, phone surveys conducted by non-employees will reveal information at a greater depth. For large numbers of caregivers, a random sample can suffice. Some possible queries:

- What services have proved most helpful? Least helpful?
- What other services are needed for you? For the children?
- What services are available but inaccessible to you? Why?
- How have staff people been supportive? Unsupportive?
- What would you change about the system now?

For some special children you will want to do child-specific recruitment of families with particular characteristics.

Developing and publicizing your annual plan of action to meet the specified needs will hearten everyone involved in your system.

You can ask for staff views. Those who work closely with foster and adoptive parents, either during the home study period prior to placement or on an ongoing basis, can help you evaluate the impact of the pre-service training. They are already observing and assessing the parents' knowledge and skills. Let them formalize their assessments through interviews, focus groups, or written surveys.

You can ask foster/adoptive parents who have dropped out. Phone surveys by non-agency employees are most likely to elicit candid answers. Questioning can focus not only on problem areas but on possible ways your agency might have solved those problems or otherwise prevented the family's departure.

Q: What changes can we put into place quickly and easily?

A: Respond to the needs identified by caregivers. Even if your surveys' results are discouraging, seeming to require many more staff, major program restructuring or vast new resources, the needs that caregivers themselves identified should be the focus of your efforts. This attention will help make them feel that the agency is being sensitive to their needs, even if initial changes are small.

For example, one agency determined that training was inaccessible to most caregivers because it was frequently scheduled during daytime hours. Changing the classes to evenings and Saturdays was quick and easy and the caregivers appreciated the consideration.

Go back to Square One – the plan. You have a committee, a process, and systems to carry out your plan. Make sure the plan is revised to incorporate what you've learned from your surveys, and that it includes specific objectives and activities, including realistic time frames, short-term goals, and responsible parties.

For example, developing neighborhood-based support groups is an ambitious yet necessary undertaking, one that will require a great deal of planning and groundwork before it becomes reality.

Make the plan public. Developing and publicizing your annual plan of action to meet the specified needs will hearten everyone involved

in your system. It will also provide a benchmark by which everyone's work can be evaluated, and a goal to guide choices among the inevitable alternatives for action.

Q: How do we make this new procedure “the way we do business here,” not “this week's pet project”?

A: Be consistent, insistent, and persistent. Too often, agencies fail to rebuild foster care and adoption systems because their initiatives are implemented haphazardly or are viewed by those affected as only the latest time-limited project imposed from above.

Here are some ways to build in success:

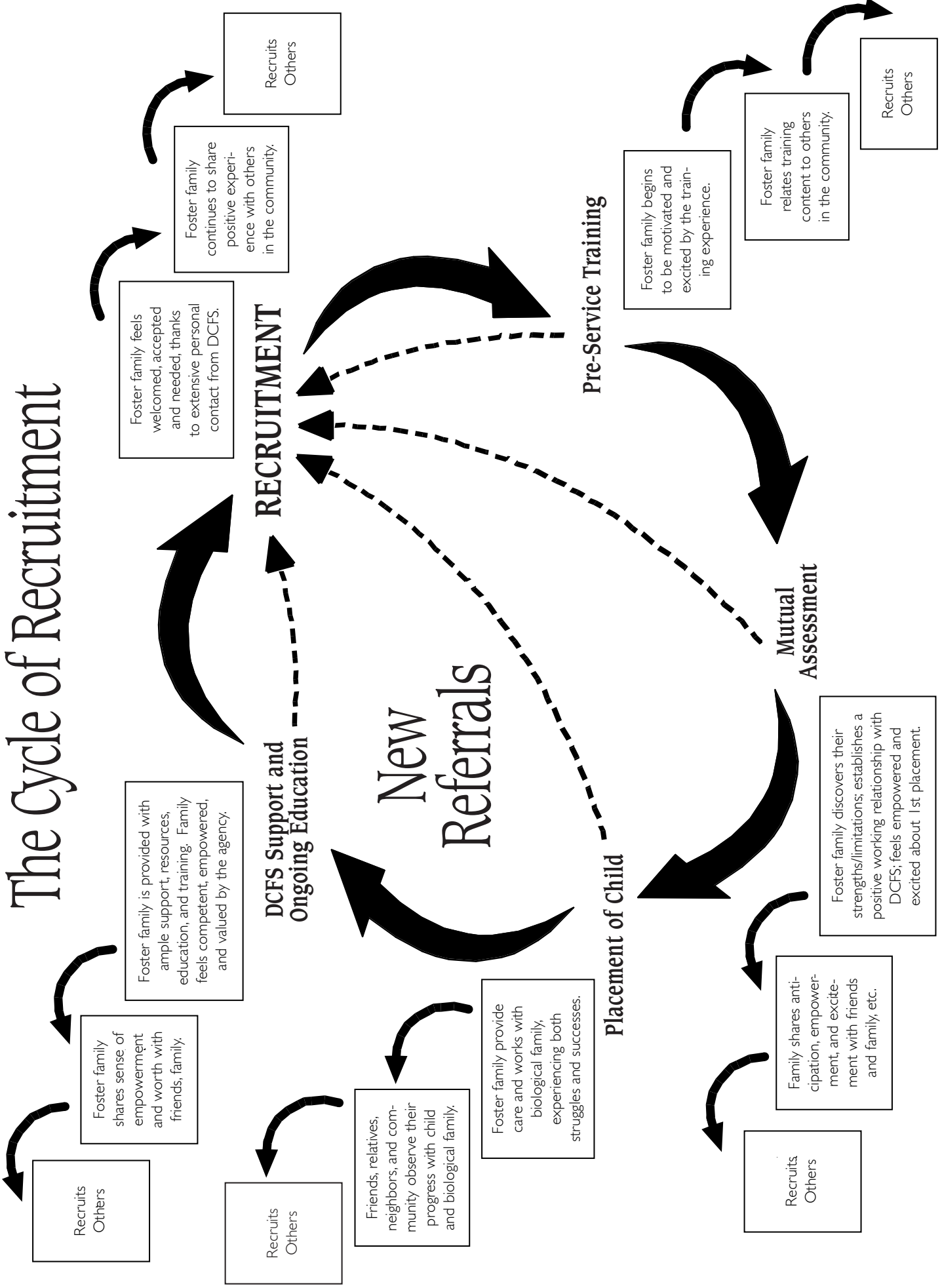
- Announce the program changes as permanent shifts, and then actively and publicly support and refer to them.
- Establish a long-term strategic plan (3-5 years) for continued development of recruitment, foster care services, and adoption procedures. Involve all elements of your system in developing the plan.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of program components on a regular basis.
- Use terminology that indicates permanent change, not temporary measures.
- If needed, restructure departments to support the necessary changes.
- Relocate individuals who undermine changes and development.
- Train and educate all staff on the new behavior expected of everyone.
- Integrate the revised philosophy and program components into all staff and caregiver training, policies, and procedures.

Armed with new internal practices, training programs and support systems for families, your child welfare agency will eventually embark on fresh recruitment efforts, knowing that when families show an interest in the system, the system will be able to demonstrate in return that it is very interested in them. Only then will the numbers of foster families begin to stabilize at levels that will allow the needs of children at risk to be met.

Good luck! Please contact us if you have questions or suggestions.

Attached are several hand-outs you can use during staff and foster parent trainings.

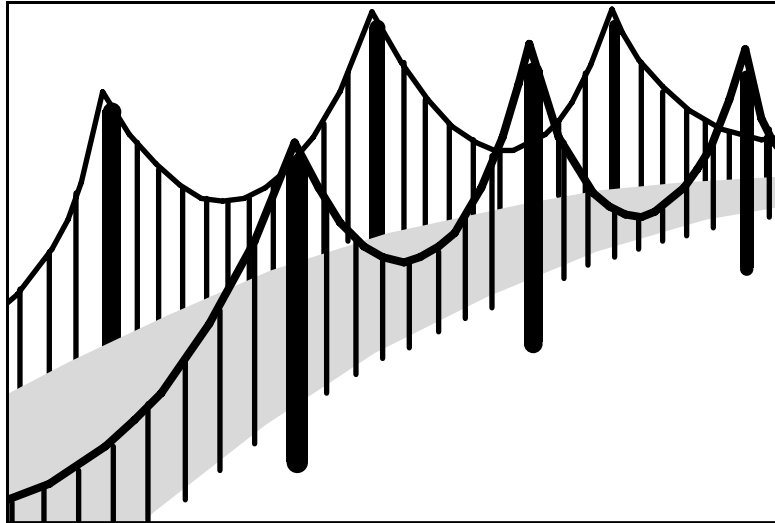
The Cycle of Recruitment



Social Workers

Bridging the gap of separation between children and their families

A Continuum of Contact

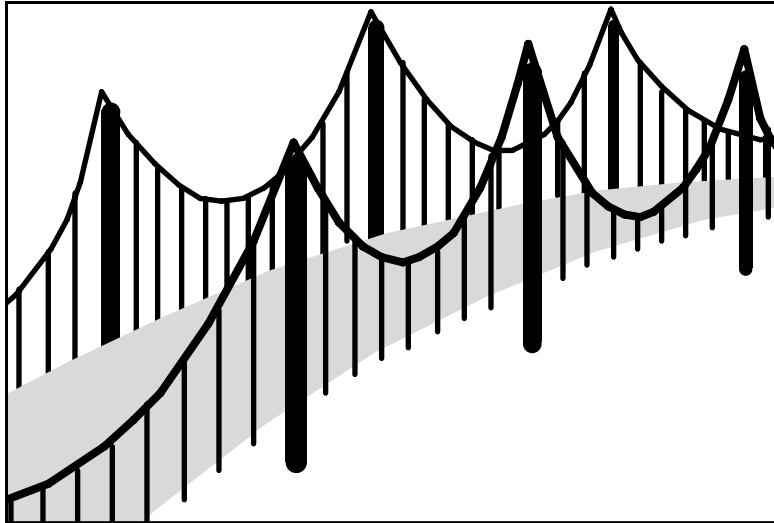


- Encourage exchange of information between birth parent and foster parent
- Have birth parent/foster parent exchange pictures
- Talk positively about birth parent to foster parent
- Talk positively about foster parent to birth parent
- Schedule regular and frequent visitation
- Arrange phone contact between foster parent/birth parent
- Share all information with foster parent/birth parent
- Encourage foster parent to host sibling visits
- Serve as liaison between foster parent and birth parent
- Describe foster parent in non-identifying terms at placement
- Exchange monthly progress reports with birth parent/foster parent
- Serve as positive role model to foster parent and birth parent
- Assist foster parent/birth parent in understanding cultural differences
- Insure that foster parent/birth parent attend agency meetings
- Facilitate conversations between birth parent/foster parent
- Have foster parent and birth parent to work on lifebook together
- Encourage birth parent to permit foster parent to call home
- Set clear boundaries for contact
- Facilitate the development of a collaborative relationship between birth parent and foster parent
- Debrief foster parent regarding birth parent problems/needs
- Participate in visitations
- Talk openly with birth parent/foster parent about their concerns
- Help foster parent understand the birth parent's problems
- Assist birth parent welcoming foster parent to home
- Encourage foster parent to transport child to home
- Permit foster parent to invite birth parent to attend all appointments
- Encourage foster parent to transport birth parent to agency meetings and child's appointments
- Encourage foster parent to allow birth parent to call foster home
- Assist foster parent/birth parent in managing conflict
- Mediate and resolve conflicts
- Assist foster parent in welcoming birth parent to home
- Allow foster parent/birth parent to schedule all visitation
- Encourage post reunification contact
- Suggest that foster parent can provide respite care after reunification
- Empower foster parent to set limits and boundaries, re: Contact and Visitation

Foster Parents

Bridging the gap of separation between children and their families

A Continuum of Contact

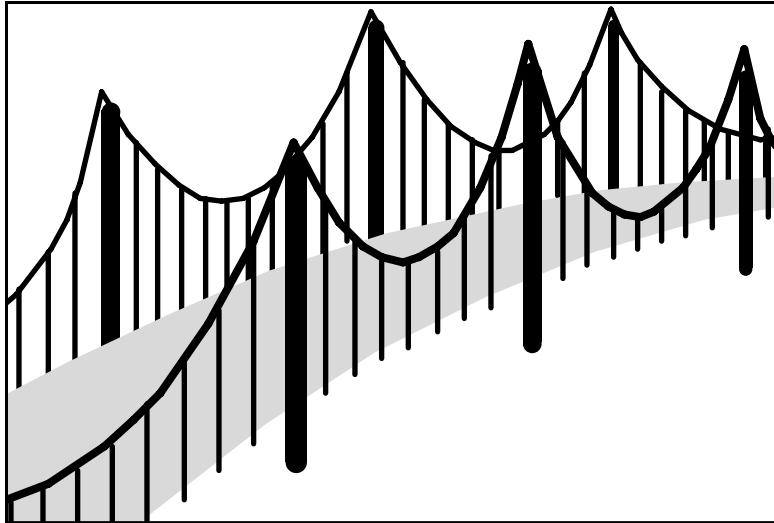


- Exchange letters with child's family via social worker
- Call child's parent on phone
- Request pictures of child's family to display in child's room
- Give parents pictures of child
- Share copies of homework and report cards with family
- Have positive view of child's family
- Talk openly with child about family
- Send snack/activity for visit
- Encourage parent's progress
- Dress child up for visits
- Provides written information for SAR
- Shares monthly progress reports with/BP
- Foster parent hosts/arranges sibling visits
- Brag to parent about child
- Request cultural information from birth parent
- Transport child to visit
- Talk with parent at visit
- Encourage parent to phone child
- Meets child's family at placement
- Non-threatening attitude
- Refer to child as your child to birth parent
- Share parenting information
- Attend staffings, SARs, reviews
- Help birth parent find community resources
- Encourage/reassure reunification
- Share child's lifebook with parents
- Attend training to learn how to work directly with birth parent
- Learn about, understand and respect the birth parents' culture
- Take/pick up child to/at parent's home
- Serve as parent's mentor
- Review child's visits with parent
- Give parent's verbal progress reports
- Ask parent to come to appointments
- Foster parent transports birth parent to meetings
- Invite child's family to attend school programs
- Assist in planning child's return to birth home
- Welcome child's parents into your home
- Attend parenting classes with parents
- Arrange family visits with parents
- Serve as support to family following reunification
- Foster parents provides respite care
- Include birth parent in farewell activities

Birth Parents

Bridging the gap of separation with their children

A Continuum of Contact



- Send cards/letters to child at foster home via social worker
- Send family pictures to child via social worker
- Attend all visits/meetings
- Attend all classes/appointments
- Make regular contact with social worker
- Plan special activities for visits
- Remember child's birthday and holidays
- Talk with child about separation
- Write down important information about child such as diet, routine, habits, etc.
- Send medical/school/etc. records to foster parent via social worker
- Encourage child to cooperate with placement
- Share critical cultural information with foster parent
- Discuss child's activities with foster parent at visits
- Share family information with foster parent
- Arrange phone calls from child
- Develop positive relationship with foster parent
- Talk with foster parent at agency meetings
- Give foster parent your home phone number
- Attend school meetings with foster parent
- Help develop the child's lifebook
- Include foster parent in visitation activities
- Do not make unrealistic promises to child
- Avoid giving child a specific date for reunification
- Learn about, understand and respect the foster parent's culture
- Invite foster parent to your home
- Phone child at foster home
- Invite foster parent to child's birthday party
- Discuss case plan progress with foster parent
- Review child's behavior with foster parent
- Invite foster parent to attend parenting classes with you
- Ask foster parent for help in locating community resources
- Include foster parent in child's return home
- Visit child in foster home
- Work with foster parent on discipline problems
- Call foster parent for help with parenting problems
- Allow child to keep in contact with foster parent after reunification
- Work with foster parent to solve school problems
- Include foster parent in holiday celebrations
- Show appreciation to foster parent
- Offer to take child to appointments for foster parent