



The  
Million Dollar Kids:

A Hope  
For Their  
Future

The RAD! Program  
(Relationships Are Decisions!)  
of  
Family Focus Adoption Services



# family FOCUS

Adoption Services

EMPOWERING CHILDREN / TRANSFORMING LIVES

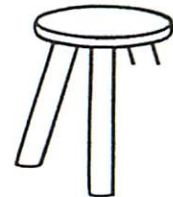
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## Preface



When the government takes responsibility for a child by bringing the child into foster care, the many roles of a parent are now split, most often temporarily, among three different parties. The first, government itself - through family court and DSS - takes on the job of financially supporting and placing the child, and overseeing, if not determining, the short and long term future of the child. The second, the foster care providers - whether foster parents, group home staff, or institutional workers - take on the short term day-to-day decisions that parents ordinarily make regarding the physical, educational, medical, and emotional care of the child. And finally the third, the families of origin, remain the people who, after whatever interventions are provided, will eventually take back permanent responsibility for the child.

This three legged stool of support gives the children - more or less - what they need to grow to maturity. However, as a society - outside of adoption - we have never found a good substitution for that third leg. So, when a child is freed for adoption and, despite our best efforts, new family after new family never become a forever family, the third leg of the stool disappears, causing the stool, sooner or later, to collapse.



These children become the multiply-betrayed children of the system. While they need parents desperately, they are not ready to live within families. Putting them into families prematurely makes their situations far worse when the families (inevitably for the children who qualify for our program) give them up and walk away. Even in group settings, these children exhaust caregivers. They have an outsized impact on the child welfare system and their placement costs until adulthood can easily total over a million dollars.

Many of these children, though not all, carry a diagnosis of Reactive Attachment Disorder. All of them appear "stuck." And it is apparent that they have learned and deeply believe that relationships - certainly with adults - are dangerous. The key to giving back to these kids their future is to give to them a relationship that will reveal to them a bigger truth: that [RAD!] Relationships Are Decisions.

## **Introduction**

The children referred to Family Focus Adoption Services are the children for whom neither birth family reunification nor adoption by the current foster parents are options any longer. Among this referral population are the most difficult to place children in the system, especially children with a diagnosis of Reactive Attachment Disorder. Many of these children have burned through (and burned out) a number of adoptive homes. Almost all of these kids have multiple diagnoses, and many are in group care, often residential treatment centers. Each one of them has cost the county taxpayers enormous amounts of money. One director has referred to them as the "Million Dollar Children." We think that two million is more realistic.

And still, despite this expense, there is a gap in services which practically guarantees that these kids will – through no fault of their own - become kids without positive futures. The counties are at a loss as to what to do with them, and the goals of the residentially necessarily focus (primarily) on current behavior. Yet, without the life long support that families provide us, many of them will age out into the adult services programs, or worse. And when they have their own children, everything becomes generational and the cycle continues.

A new model – an adoption readiness model - is called for.

## **Pilot Program – Future Workers**

As an adoption agency - exclusively - Family Focus is in the protected position (because we don't have to deal with foster care emergencies) of being able to concentrate on the adoption preparation needed by this traumatized and vulnerable population of multiply betrayed children **prior** to adoptive placement. A model for that work would necessitate that the kids remain in their foster care placements - whether the current one or a different one - until ready for adoptive placement.

In early 2013, Family Focus began a pilot program, Relationships Are Decisions (RAD!) based primarily out of Albany, allowing for that exact work. Currently, from three counties, there are five different children enrolled, with two more counties looking at enrolling one each. Our goal for the pilot is to have up to, but no more than, a dozen children enrolled.

This one worker-one child program not only has each child assigned to a worker, but each worker assigned to **only** one child. These workers are called "Future Workers." Each Future Worker has been carefully and deliberately chosen by us for their non-bureaucratic approach to relationships. Each has direct service child welfare experience of long standing. It is a part time job for them of about 25 hours a month, including all the driving required. Each has individual telephone and email supervision throughout the month, and monthly in-person group supervision and training for four hours one Saturday a month. Each worker is asked to make a three-year commitment to the program.

Very different than the usual practice, our Future Workers are not limited by geography. They will meet with their client no matter where the client's residence might be or change to in the future, within two hundred miles of our Albany, Newburgh, or New York City offices. Longer distances would require more flexibility to figure out.

Our Future Workers fill that gap in services that we referred to earlier. They are neither therapists nor teachers. They are not acting as social workers, child-care workers, nor case managers. They are not big brothers/big sisters, nor mentors. Their role is a new one in the system. The worker's job is to develop a consistent, protective and supportive relationship with the child, focused – together - on the child's future. When that future is settled – hopefully through adoption – the relationship would come to its natural end. We expect the relationship building to take about a year and to be safely and deeply established before we would dare to introduce the child to any possible family.

## **The Program**

The work with the child would take place during twice-monthly meetings. These meetings would take place away from the child's residence, in a public place of the child's choosing, such as McDonalds, to be used as an "office." Each meeting is no longer than two hours from picking up the child to returning the child. Each meeting would have future work to be done, consisting of relationship and adoption themes that are also taught in our parent training classes. This parallel teaching (given to all our families prior to their being certified) provides child and family with a common language regarding feelings, boundaries, rules, roles, respect, cultural norms, broken adoptions (many had what we call counterfeit adoptions), irrelevant truths, attachment, caring, and love. The object is to widen the children's perspective – as we do with our families - on what it means to be part of an adoptive family, and for them to recognize and value the protective power of thinking.

Because each worker has been "hired" by the child to help the child figure out his/her future, with the optimum goal of adoption, each child signs a contract for this work, and also signs an acknowledgement of the rules of the relationship. For example, Rule # 1: future workers are not allowed to adopt the program kids.

Since an adoptive family may not be able to be found for every one of these kids, or the child may decide against adoption, the secondary goal is to get the children feeling safe enough that they can be moved to a lower level of care.

If a family is found, however, stage two would be a very long visiting transition process. The child and the worker (and of course the county) would evaluate together each visit along the themes already explored in stage one. Stage three would have the child move in with the family and go through FFAS's In-House Transition process, with the Future Worker remaining in relationship with the child through to finalization.



## Our Relationship With The Counties

Until and unless the children are adopted, their guardians are their home counties, in the person of their county caseworker. Caseworkers may change, but the county overseeing remains consistent. That consistency (placements come and go) is the only consistency these kids may have until they grow up.

All of our work begins with that fact. We will not see a child until and unless the county caseworker has secured the child's permission for us to come talk to them. Our first meeting with the child always has the county caseworker present, at least by phone. The county caseworker is the final signator on the contracts we sign with the kids. All our meeting notes are emailed directly to the county caseworker within 72 hours. It is the county that will approve any family that steps forward to adopt one of our RAD! Program kids.

We want the kids to understand that the county caseworker is the boss, no matter where the kid lives or what program he/she is in, including ours. We need that to reinforce the sense of protection that the kids must have and that can only come – prior to an adoption, of course - from the ultimate (and permanent) authority that is their county.

Because our RAD! Future Workers, by design, are part-timers they all have other jobs. Therefore, all needed county and school meetings can be covered by our supervisory/administrative staff.

## The Hope

It only makes sense that an adoption agency is the right place for an adoption readiness program. Family Focus was created by adoptive parents; our board consists of mostly adoptive parents; many of our staff are adoptive parents. Over the years we have developed approaches, programs, and training to meet the needs of this population of children. The RAD! Program is the culmination of decades of adoption expertise and adoption experience. Our hope is that through this program every child, no matter their histories, will be able to finally – and successfully - connect with an adoptive family.



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## **RELATIONSHIPS ARE DECISIONS (RAD!) PROGRAM RULES**

1. Future Workers are not allowed to adopt the program kids.
2. Future Workers are not allowed to lend the program kids money.
3. Future Workers must keep written notes on all meetings for the county.
4. Future Workers can only call kids to let them know about changed appointments.
5. Kids can only call Future Workers for important business.
6. All meetings between the kid and the Future Worker are private. Others can only be invited if kid and FW agree.
7. Unless safety issues are involved, all meetings for doing adoption business always take place at the chosen "office."
8. Meetings are not long meetings and no matter what kids must be returned to a supervising adult within two hours at the most.

Understood and Agreed To On March 28, 2014:

Kid:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Harry Potter

Future Worker:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mary Future Worker

County Worker:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Joe County Worker

Family Focus Witness:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Family Focus Witness



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## Future & Adoption Work Agreement

March 28, 2014

We, Mary Future Worker and Harry Potter, hereby agree for Mary to become Harry's Future Worker. In order to do that job Harry and Mary each agree to the following:

1. We will meet twice a month.
2. We will find an "office" away from Harry's house (like McDonald's) where we can have those meetings.
3. We will each do our own Future Work:
  - a) Harry will become an expert on adoption and on thinking about his future.
  - b) Mary will teach Harry many of the things that Harry will need to know to become that adoption expert and to make decisions regarding his future.
  - c) Harry will tell Mary if there are things he doesn't understand, or things he doesn't agree with, or things he doesn't like.
  - d) Mary will become an expert on Harry. As part of doing that, Mary will talk with all the adults responsible for Harry.
4. We will continue this work as long as Harry's future is not settled, and Whatever County continues to agree to allow us to work together.

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Mary Future Worker

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Harry Potter

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County DSS Witness

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Family Focus Witness