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**September/October 2009**

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## MAINTAINING FOSTER PARENTS

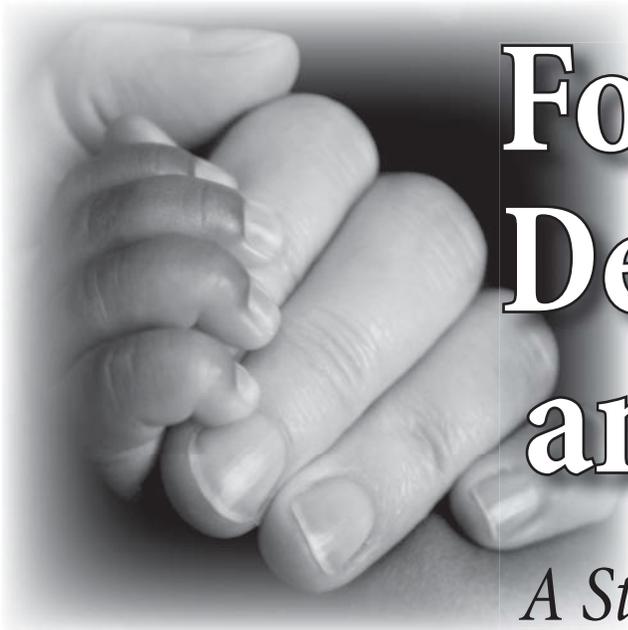**Recruitment and Retention Ideas for Keeping Foster Families on Board**

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# Foster Parent Development and Support

## *A Strengths/Needs Checklist*

Articles, books and research project findings on foster parent recruitment and retention go back decades. In 1982, for example, the U.S. Children's Bureau published an article titled "Finding and Keeping More Foster Parents." It was promising that the federal government took an interest in the topic, featuring it in its Children Today magazine, which described innovative programs around the country. The article had two premises: (1) There must be a clearly defined role for foster parents before they are recruited, as how can any organization recruit people unless it's clear what they are being asked to do? (2) We wouldn't have to work so hard to find foster parents, if we worked harder to keep them.

Child welfare literature indicates that initial attention to the role of foster parents dates back almost 70 years when, in 1941, Social Service Review published an article in which the author questioned whether foster parents should be considered clients, colleagues or something in between.

In 1985, Eileen Gambrill and Theodore Stein edited a Children and Youth Services Review special issue on permanency planning, including the article, "Permanency

planning and foster parenting: Implications for recruitment, selection, training and retention." Permanency was a relatively new concept then, following the passage of the federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 legislation. The article emphasized that, for permanency endeavors to be successful, foster parents had to be full partners, requiring a comprehensive approach to recruiting, assessing, selecting and training them for that role.

Also in the 1980s, the U.S. Children's Bureau funded two demonstration projects related to foster parent recruitment and retention. The "People Like Us Project" had good recruitment outcomes that were not matched with as strong retention outcomes. "Project CARR - Community Approach to Retention and Recruitment" documented that the community could have a significant role in helping to keep foster parents, as well as in finding them.

In the early 1990s, the PRIDE program reconceptualized recruitment and retention as development and support. The premise was that most people who want to foster or adopt children with special needs don't begin with the skills essential to care for children who have been neglected and

physically and sexually abused. These skills must be developed. And foster and adoptive parents aren't clients who receive services but rather, resource families who need and deserve a comprehensive array of system supports.

In 1995, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) published the book, "Foster Parent Retention and Recruitment: State of the Art in Practice and Policy." It described programs across the country, and emphasized that retention strategies must be in place before recruitment endeavors should begin. This is because most of the studies on retention, although few at that time, indicated the most common reason for foster parents to leave was not having a clear role and not being treated with dignity and respect by their agencies.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Inspector General, published "Retaining Foster Families" and "Recruiting Foster Families," with summaries available through the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPP). In 2005, NRCFCPP's director, Gary Mallon, with Peg Hess, edited an 800-page book titled "Child welfare for the twenty-first century: A hand-

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# *Checklist:* 25 Requirements for Foster Parent Recruitment, Retention, Development, and Support

| Requirement | Strength | Needs Work | | | Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Ability | Resources | Willingness | |
| 1. Clarify the essential role of foster parents as partners in achieving safety, well-being, and permanency for the children in their care, and ensure that role is explained to staff and the community. | | | | | |
| 2. Use recruitment themes that focus on the value of foster parents. | | | | | |
| 3. Combine competency-based preservice training with a culturally competent strengths/needs mutual assessment process. | | | | | |
| 4. Introduce new foster parents to other members of their professional team. | | | | | |
| 5. Collaborate with foster parents in their essential role to protect and nurture children, meet their developmental needs, support their relationships with their birth families, connect to safe and nurturing lifetime relationships, and serve as a member of a professional team. | | | | | |
| 6. Provide mentors for new foster parents. | | | | | |
| 7. Place children with foster parents by choice, not chance — matching the assessed strengths and needs of each child with the assessed competencies and qualifications of and supports for the foster family. | | | | | |
| 8. Involve foster parents in the development of culturally-sensitive agency policies, programs, and practices that impact family foster care, with attention to the unique needs of ethnic and sexual-minority children and families. | | | | | |
| 9. Provide foster parents with access to appropriate health and mental health services for the children in their care. | | | | | |
| 10. Reimburse foster parents for the full cost of fostering. | | | | | |
| 11. Provide fostering liability insurance. | | | | | |
| 12. Establish policies and practices for foster parent abuse allegation prevention and intervention. | | | | | |
| 13. Give foster parents regular consultation by skilled and supportive staff, as well as immediate help for all members of their families, especially birth and other children in the family, in times of crisis and transition. | | | | | |
| 14. Provide foster parents with respite care. | | | | | |
| 15. Establish accessible competency-based preservice, advanced, and specialized training. | | | | | |
| 16. Provide foster parents with an ongoing assessment of their strengths and needs based on a foster family development and support plan. | | | | | |
| 17. Recognize the value of relicensing or recertification as a process for ongoing development and support. | | | | | |
| 18. Provide foster parents with opportunities for professional development. | | | | | |
| 19. Give foster parents access to their own files. | | | | | |
| 20. Have an ethical grievances and appeals process. | | | | | |
| 21. Offer recognition for accomplishments. | | | | | |
| 22. Encourage foster parents to participate in local and state foster parent associations and the National Foster Parent Association. | | | | | |
| 23. Conduct exit meetings to learn why foster parents leave fostering, and integrate this information into the agency's continuous quality improvement plan. | | | | | |
| 24. Differentiate between supports unique to foster parents, and those applicable for adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, and agency staff. | | | | | |
| 25. Discontinue using the four-letter word "home" and replace it with "family," as a reminder that families, not homes, have strengths, needs, feelings, and skills. | | | | | |

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book of practices, policies, and programs." It included a chapter titled, "Foster parent development and support: Strategies for the 21st century." And one strategy to enhance retention is to use more strengths-based, family-friendly words.

Let's discontinue language that originated with the 19th century orphan train movement. For example, the expression "up for adoption" came from the practice of putting arriving children up on train station platforms, or theater stages, so they could be viewed and selected. "Home study" came from the original "house study" done to ensure that the new foster parents had the requisite well water and floor space, and this could be replaced with a "culturally competent strengths/needs family assessment." It's not the home that heals or hurts children, but the people living there that do. "Birth" or "biological" parents have, for the most part, replaced the old "natural" parents, as if foster parents are not natural. But if we can only manage one systems-wide language change, let's replace "foster home" with "foster family." This might help with foster parent retention, if at least caseworkers could remember that they are working with families which, unlike homes, do have feelings. And then it might be possible to have family consultation meetings, instead of "home visits."

The Children's Bureau Child Welfare Information Gateway provides numerous references, including projects relating to foster families of color and lesbian and gay foster parents. Last year, the Children's Bureau awarded grants to several jurisdictions around the country to demonstrate success in foster parent recruitment and, hopefully, there will be a focus on retention, as well.

If extensive research and writing has been done on foster parent development and support dating back decades, why do we continue to struggle with finding and keeping foster parents? Perhaps the issue is ability: people don't know how because they don't access the literature. Or perhaps the problem is resources: there just aren't the tools and funding to put retention programs in place. Or maybe the issue is willingness: we know what to do and we have some resources, but we just don't value the effort.

Here is a strengths/needs checklist of 25 requirements for foster parent development and support, adapted from the 1995 CWLA publication referenced here. Review the list and determine if these requirements are in place in your jurisdiction. If yes, put a check in that column. If no, check that column, along with the reasons why:

- Is it ability — the knowledge and skills are lacking?
- Is it resources — there isn't the funding or the workforce, or some other missing piece?
- Is it willingness — there isn't the political or administrative leadership, or the community support, or even the commitment by the stakeholders themselves, such as foster parent associations?

If the challenge is knowledge and skills, please read the literature. If the problem is resources or willingness, read Lori Ross's article titled "Moving Mountains" in this Fostering Families Today issue. She provides an inspiring perspective on how to mobilize for action. Note that some of the requirements listed in the checklist do not require funding. For example, for requirement #1, all that's necessary is the leadership and commitment to put into agency policy that foster parents have an essential, critical role in helping achieve the federally mandated outcomes of child safety, well-being, and permanency. Without foster parents, there is no family foster care. Write your action steps in the last column.

You may have heard John Legend's song, "If You're Out There," with the words, "We can't afford to wait, the future started yesterday and we're already late." When it comes to at-risk children, all of us — especially local, state, and national foster parent associations, and adoptive family and kinship caregiver organizations, and social work advocates — can't wait. We must implement mountain-moving strategies, even if we start with just a little hill. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Eileen Mayers Pasztor has been a child welfare social worker for 40 years and, with her husband, Andy, is still taking care of their two now adult foster and adoptive children because of their special needs. She is the principal designer of PRIDE, original developer of MAPP, and has trained and given keynotes for over 10,000 foster and adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, social workers, and advocates around the country and internationally. She has MSW and DSW degrees, and currently is a social work professor at California State University, Long Beach where she teaches courses in child welfare and social policy advocacy. She is working with CWLA on a new kinship care collaboration curriculum.

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