

No Place Like Home



**One community at a time, without directives, legislation or rules,
Florida's foster care workers transformed their system**

A Review of the Quality Parenting Initiative

By Neil Skene



Summary

Since it was piloted in 2008, the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) has implemented sweeping reforms over Florida's foster care system. QPI has focused heavily on improving the recruitment of foster parents as well as ensuring that only the most qualified individuals care for the children. Youth and foster parents also now have a greater voice within the foster care system; QPI agencies have relied heavily on their feedback to guide recruitment, licensing, and placement reform, and foster parents and children alike are now encouraged to participate in many administrative meetings and help lead pre-service training. With their participation, licensing and training have become more efficient and responsive. To enhance the everyday communication, the participating agencies created new telephone lines that have decreased response time and improved service. QPI has also guided the expansion of foster parent mentor programs, which provide support and guidance to new and struggling foster families.

About the Author

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Quality Parenting Initiative Florida Website: www.qpiflorida.org

<http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi/pages/default.aspx>

Link to all QPI Documents

<http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi1/docs/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

A foster parent is a full partner in a team supporting the healthy development and achieving permanency for children who cannot live with their parents. The specific job of the foster parent is to provide high quality parenting, consistent with the needs of the child, when appropriate to mentor the bioparent, and to maintain a lifelong commitment to the child wherever he or she lives.

In a different place and a different time, the kids sleeping on couches at the child welfare office in Tallahassee might have turned into just another drawn-out lawsuit against a child welfare agency for neglecting the kids it was supposed to protect. The case probably would go the way of so many other lawsuits against supposedly underfunded, overburdened welfare agencies that are flagrantly failing to serve some group of people they are supposed to serve. After hours and hours in discovery and in court, a judge might have said, “Don’t do that anymore.” But things wouldn’t really change that much for the kids in foster care.

Carole Shauffer understood that. As executive director of the Youth Law Center in San Francisco, she doesn’t mind litigating. The center has pursued dozens of lawsuits all over the country. But the center also works directly with child welfare organizations to improve their organization and their work. Shauffer is a different kind of lawyer, and the new secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), Robert A. Butterworth, was a different kind of public official. After 16 years as Florida’s elected attorney general, he declared upon taking his new job that the agency “will quit defending the indefensible.”

Shauffer and Butterworth got together at a statewide meeting of the Florida Children’s Coalition, made up of contract providers in child welfare. What Shauffer was looking for was more and better foster parents, and to accomplish that, “I wanted to develop a different image of foster care,” she says. She told Butterworth, “I can

continue to sue you all across the state, because this is probably happening everywhere, or I can help you figure out how to do this better.”

That approach was just what Butterworth was looking for. He was enlisting advocates who had been suing DCF to do exactly what Shauffer was offering – to figure out how to make it better. Advocates, he said, “make unresponsive government responsive.”

Shauffer had the novel idea that they could attract more foster parents by raising the standards than by lowering them. “It’s like Harvard and Yale,” she says. “The harder they are to get into, the more people want to go there.” She decided to bring in a branding expert to talk to the foster care staffs about brands and why some brands symbolize quality, as well as the ways companies preserve those brands. The goal was to understand what it means to have a high quality foster care system, then to build a system to support that idea.

She latched onto the idea of a “brand” for foster care because her own organization, the Youth Law Center, had gone through a planning process that including a discussion of “brand” identity. It is an odd way of approaching child welfare, to be sure, but she decided it was a more appealing than talking about “strategic objectives.”

One other person made a big difference at that that meeting between Butterworth and Shauffer. Someone had invited Jane Soltis, the vice president for programs at the Eckerd Family Foundation. The foundation put most of its emphasis on children in the delinquency and dependency systems. Soltis also chairs the state’s Independent Living Advisory Council, focusing on the preparation of adolescents in foster care for living on their own after turning 18. Soltis committed \$20,000 from Eckerd to support the training program Shauffer was proposing. The state’s part was to pay Shauffer’s travel and the cost of experts brought in.

This is the story of what happened after that. Instead of just a training program, the project is still going after four years and has transformed the entire culture and working relationships in foster care. What became the Quality Parenting Initiative is now active in 16 of Florida’s 20 judicial circuits. The Eckerd Family Foundation has contributed nearly \$1 million to make it happen, including the support of spinoff programs, and considers the project one of its legacy accomplishments.

This is not just a story about the transformation of foster care, though. It is also a story about an unusual alliance with an unusual idea: a change-oriented state agency that believed in stakeholders working as allies instead of rivals . . . a charismatic lawyer whose knowledge and acuity about child welfare are exceeded only by her charm in getting people to do things . . . and a foundation with money and an eye for opportunity to invest in making a difference.

It is a story about people, once caught in a bad system that gave them no time to care, only time to follow procedures . . . people now exercising control not only of

their own jobs but of the system itself . . . people who have more responsibility, not to “a system” but to each other . . . people who decided they wanted “foster parent” to be a brand that stands for quality and wanted to “live the brand” they created for themselves.

And there is another story, too. This is a story about a different way to manage a huge state agency, about a way to win the hearts and minds and not merely the grudging compliance of the people who work in a complex and challenging system. It is about how to create something that endures. Instead of a bureaucracy waiting out the current gubernatorial appointee, the bureaucracy has remade a system the way they want it to work – one they can defy a future appointee to try to change.

A more conventional approach to the initial problem – kids removed from their families and taken into a system with no place to put them – might have produced a feverish effort to find a few more foster parents or stuff one more kid into an existing foster home. Quality didn’t matter when you had a court order; the order would basically call for room and board. But the kids in the waiting room reflected a larger problem: Too many kids were being taken into care, and there were too few foster parents to take care of them.

The solution that evolved was the Quality Parenting Initiative, a reinvention of the entire approach to foster care. One circuit at a time, the people on the front lines of the foster care system worked through their expectations, their challenges and ways to make the system work better to create a better foster care experience for children. The program even got its own logo – a brain in the shape of a heart, symbolizing a commitment to both best practices that work and caring and nurturing parenting. They had created an effective system they wanted, not an ineffective one they hated.

“I wanted to develop a different image of foster care,” Shauffer says. “It turned into respect, because the process led people to respect each other. You can’t tell people to go respect each other. When they all meet together, they develop a relationship, they understand what each other is doing, they understand that they share a common value. There are still a lot of people who weren’t part of the process, and we’ll have to bring them, but the people who were part of it have developed respect for each other. And for themselves. They see themselves as more effective.”

“You have taken charge of your own future,” Secretary George Sheldon remarked in his last major speech, to the Dependency Summit in August 2010. “No governor will want to change that direction. No Legislature will turn the clock back. No one will want to declare that he or she can do this better than you. You have assured that.” He wasn’t speaking particularly about the Quality Parenting Initiative, but about the sense of partnership and problem-solving that had driven child welfare initiatives the past four years. QPI was one of the least bureaucratic and most worker-driven of all the child welfare initiatives.

Change the System, Not Just the Training

The single biggest problem with the vast majority of training – and education, for that matter – is that it is not transformative. Even if the lessons themselves are compelling, you cannot go away to “training” for a couple of days, return to an environment where everything is still the same, and expect to be doing anything very differently a month from now. Whatever you learned will be subsumed by the inertia of the system.

Consider military boot camp. The military has the challenge of overcoming people’s natural self-protective instinct and preparing young soldiers to respond instantly to a command that puts them in extreme danger. You don’t accomplish that by sending them to MAPP training, or giving a class on cleaning a rifle or staying fit. You accomplish that by having them live in an environment that combines physical conditioning with mental conditioning, day after day after day, until it is part of the way they act. It’s the way you train dogs, and the way you train lawyers and doctors. Leadership, strategy, equipment, operational support and a lot of other things make the difference between the brilliant bayonet charge at Little Round Top at Gettysburg and the disastrous “Charge of the Light Brigade.” But the team members have to be prepared to do what is expected of them with the tools they have.

If child welfare or any other underperforming system is going to undergo dramatic improvement, it will not be by improving the training. It will be through redesigning the system in which people work, and then training them for success in that more promising system.

That is the secret behind the Quality Parenting Initiative and the transformative effect it is having.

What foster care needed was a new system, not new training. As in most organizations, a training program would have all the visible impact of throwing a rock into a pond: the ripples don’t last long. A real transformation would need to be relentless. It would have to endure long enough that the people change the system, instead of being changed by it.

In a sprawling state with 18 million people, it was also clear that a statewide initiative run out of headquarters in Tallahassee might well become just another bureaucratic initiative. In fact, Florida’s child welfare system for the past 15 years has been organized around the concept of “foster care,” with substantial responsibility for child welfare being allocated to local “foster care lead agencies,” known as CBCs, which manage most day-to-day operations at the local level.

So with the initial blessing from Secretary Butterworth, Shauffer started with a handful of Florida’s 20 CBCs. There would be a pilot group of three CBCs.

Shauffer talked to Glen Casel, the CEO of CBC of Seminole and board chairman of the CBC trade association, the Florida Coalition for Children. His CBC in suburban Seminole County signed on. He suggested inviting Hillsborough Kids in Tampa, where the Eckerd Family Foundation is based, and CEO Jeff Rainey readily enlisted. And Mike Watkins, the CEO of Big Bend CBC serving Tallahassee and part of the western Panhandle, wanted in.

The community-by-community approach proved to be the continuing model. Trying to do this on a statewide basis “would’ve been like herding cats,” says Daugherty at Heartland. Focusing on the local community first of all preserved the independence of each local community. Each circuit had different approaches, or at least different priorities. There was no reason to force Seminole County to do things exactly like Hillsborough County. They were different organizations, with different communities, different problems, and different types of leadership. Focusing on one area at a time meant people who work together could build their system and learn together and feel more ownership of what was created.

While the circuit in Hillsborough County put enormous emphasis on the mentor program, the circuit covering Seminole County, serving a smaller population in suburban Orlando with one of the smallest proportions of kids in foster care, focused more on organizational change. Seminole even established a full-time position to lead classes. But Seminole likewise relied on foster parents to act as mentors to new families before and after the licensing process. The goals were about the same, but each circuit could do things its own way.

Keeping the focus at the community level created a greater sense of a close-knit team and a foundation for ongoing problem-solving and organizational change. As issues of practice and policy came up, there was an effective structure in place to raise them and deal with them instead of letting them fester, as happens so often in bureaucracies.

Partnerships, Credibility and Change

In Florida, the focus on foster parenting was an outgrowth of a larger theme in child welfare that took root after Robert Butterworth became secretary of DCF. His idea was that the state was a lousy parent, and the welfare of children in the state system depended on strengthening the family they lived with, whether it was their own biological family, an adoptive family or relative, or a foster home. The system would focus on better outcomes for children who became a state responsibility.

Florida has attracted some attention for its reduction of nearly 40% in the number of children in out-of-home care since 2006. That was accomplished in part by shifting funds originally spent on foster care and putting it into family-oriented

services that help keep biological families together. But the quality of life for those children who remain in foster care was equally important, and that meant attention on improving the foster care experience.

So Florida was particularly fertile ground when Carole Shauffer began her work.

Shauffer's first step was to meet with the management team of the three CBCs and DCF to explain what she was planning to do and give them an overview of the concept of choosing a "brand," a public declaration of how you want to be thought of, and then living that brand. Then came a meeting with the front-line staff and supervisors – the investigators, the case managers, the foster care licensing staff, and the foster parents themselves.

At the first meeting in Hillsborough, "I think all the foster parents sat in the back," foster parent Joy Sutton recalls. "What does that tell you? It tells you how we feel. We're at the bottom of the list. Now, you get us in those meetings and we're scrambling for the front seats."

The low regard for foster parents and their own sense of powerlessness in the system was one of the biggest problems before the initiative began, as Shauffer saw it. "The most important people in the foster care system were the lowest paid and the least respected." Their phone calls to case managers were not returned. They didn't get the records they needed. They weren't invited to staffing where the child welfare professionals were making decisions about the foster child's case.

Licensing people weren't focused on recruiting good foster parents. They were focused on screening, then on corrective action if licensed foster parents got out of compliance.

The first thing the effort needed was an honest broker, and that is the role Carole Shauffer played. She has been around child welfare a long time. She is empathetic toward the people working in the system, but also critical of the system in which they work and relentlessly probing about facts and details. She used questions to help others understand the impact of their own practices on others in the system.

"Carole made us talk," says Aundré West, a foster parent who would become a mentor and recruiter for new foster parents as the initiative got under way. As his friend and fellow foster parent Joy Sutton has suggested, foster parents just wanted to sit in the back, as they always had. Shauffer says she didn't realize how meaningful it was to the foster parents that someone wanted to know what they think. "I was just doing it because I wanted to know what they thought," she says, "but it also is a model for how people should interact."

"We had different concepts of what each other's job description is," West recalls. So one of the early things they did was start to learn what each other did. Foster parents went to case-manager training, for example, and better understood the

demands on case managers. “Understanding” didn’t get their phone calls returned, but at least they understood the competing time pressures behind the problem.

“Hillsborough Kids had already begun taking a very critical look at its system of care,” says Donna Krauser, director of the CBC’s Foster Care Program. “We really needed to spend our energies...redoing the culture and the nature of that relationship with our foster families in order to have a healthier system of care.” The Quality Parenting Initiative presented “the perfect opportunity to take this to a whole new level.”

Three years later, “they have changed entirely the way they do business,” Shauffer says.

In a second phase that began a few months after the first round, four more CBCs came into the program. Two of them filled the geographic area along Interstate 4 between Hillsborough Kids and CBC of Seminole: Heartland for Children CBC, covering Polk, Hardee and Highlands counties east and southeast of Tampa, and Family Services of Metro Orlando, covering Orange and Osceola counties. Eckerd Community Alternatives, the CBC for Pinellas and Pasco counties west of Tampa, also joined. (Like the Eckerd Family Foundation, it traces its roots back to drugstore magnate Jack Eckerd, but the two are separate entities.) Child and Family Connections of Palm Beach was invited, because then-CEO Judith Warren was also regarded as an innovator.

Kim Daugherty, who’s in charge of foster care for Heartland, says she felt their foster care system was stable when QPI began, but they wanted to raise its standards. Foster parents were meeting standards on the checklist, but they were not at the level of quality they wanted to have. “When you’re looking at the placement of children, because you’ve got your fire extinguisher, because you’ve got your animals up to date with their rabies shots, doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s a home you want to place a child in.” says Ann Berner, DCF’s 10th Circuit administrator. “That’s the heart of it. You can’t be room and board anymore. If you want to be room and board, go get some cocker spaniels.”

One Monday morning, Daugherty says, she got to the office and was urged to dial into the foster care licensing office. “Everyone in the licensing service had changed their voice message.” It was simple but symbolic: “Our local foster parents are unlocking children’s futures. Your call is very important to me.” Says Daugherty: “It’s just so real and friendly that if a foster parent is calling and trying to leave a message, they’re going to feel supported and know that they’re important to our system. We’ve had great feedback from our foster parents about that.”

Two years ago, there was minimal dialog with the foster parents, she says. Now, case managers go out to foster homes instead of just calling. There are weekly meetings with foster parents. Case managers “are definitely walking more alongside the foster parents instead of in front of and giving direction,” Daugherty says.

QPI and the Ruby Slippers

During her days in the Land of Oz, Dorothy Gale of Kansas never removed the ruby slippers the good witch Glinda had given her. She did everything that was asked of her, including bringing back the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West. But she was frustrated at every turn in her desire to go home to Kansas. Finally, after the Wizard drifted off in the balloon instead of taking her home, she called out to the good witch Glinda for help.

“You don't need to be helped any longer,” Glinda said. “You’ve always had the power to go back to Kansas.”

“I have?”

“Then why didn't you tell her before?” said the Scarecrow.

“Because she wouldn't have believed me,” says Glinda. “She had to learn it for herself.”

As Glinda was trying to explain to Dorothy and the Scarecrow, the journey is as important as the destination in QPI. The process was about winning hearts and minds of the participants. They had to learn it for themselves.

Carole Shauffer says people keep asking, “Why can't we just have the training?” Or, “we want to do the bilateral agreement.” Or, “we want to do the mentors.” Why, people wonder, must we go through the same long process the others went through to reinvent the wheel. “But it's not going to do any good,” Shauffer says. They have to understand it for themselves if the changes are to be truly sustainable.

A foster parent at a similar program Shauffer is conducting in California commented in a session one day, “There's a reason Dorothy couldn't click her heels at the beginning and had to wait until the end.” Others murmured, “Oh! Exactly!”

The Hillsborough Experience

Experiences in Hillsborough County provide a good example of the many smaller initiatives that made up a successful QPI project. As a first step, Hillsborough Kids developed a Foster Parent Advisory Board, which allowed foster parents to sit at the table with other leaders in the system and have a voice in the reform process. Foster parents, biological parents, and youth now actually have influence at HKI. The CBC created telephone lines for them to express their questions concerns and receive faster responses. Those early steps were highly symbolic. And the greater interaction between case managers and foster parents in turn produced a more symbiotic, rather than adversarial, relationship.

“The partnership, working together has just been amazing,” foster parent Aundré West observed. Youth and biological parents have become involved in orientations and trainings, and, like the foster parents, have become involved in administrative meetings. Hillsborough Kids was also the first CBC in Florida to create a professional foster parent mentoring program. These mentors receive a monthly stipend for dedicating their time to assisting new and struggling foster parents.

The Hillsborough team has used the QPI strategy of rebranding to rethink its recruitment materials as well as its primary message. The old marketing and recruitment, Krauser says, “really didn’t have much meaning.” It often focused on rescuing kids from bad families, not on the continuing responsibilities of foster care. Through QPI workshops, Hillsborough redefined their image of what it means to be a foster parent and developed a message that emphasizes nurturing children, mentoring families, and being a partner in the system of care.

Like the other participating regions, Hillsborough has been able to change and develop based on QPI’s model while still retaining its own resources, leadership, and strategies. The principle behind creating programs region-by-region, Shauffer explained, was “You have to have a small enough area that people feel represented and that they’re a part of it.” This enables each region to pursue reform in the way that best suits their needs.

Hillsborough Kids, for example, combined QPI’s pre-service training model, Passport to Parenting, with several of its own programs in order to adapt it to their site’s unique circumstances. Passport to Parenting replaced their former system of MAPP training, which they realized did not truly prepare foster families for what they would experience. “Passport to Parenting really revolutionized our thinking,” Krauser explained. “What we’re trying to create is partners, teachers, and professional caregivers.” Hillsborough’s new training program heavily emphasizes field-based

activities that expose parents to the court process early on. As a result, they are better able to support their foster children throughout the legal process and to serve as an advocate on their behalf.

The Quality Parenting Initiative has also encouraged Hillsborough Kids to rethink the relationship between foster parents and birth families. Previously, many biological parents experienced a gulf between themselves and those charged with caring for their children. Because they were not encouraged to be involved in their children's foster care, when the biological parents regained custody, they were detached from many aspects of their child's life. Zere, a biological parent whose son was in foster care for two years, had this experience. "I felt like the foster parents who had my child knew more than I did...I needed that foster parent to tell me what has happened in the last two years. What is it that he likes now? What is it that he doesn't like now?"

Since their program reforms, Hillsborough has seen an increase in the number of foster parents willing to act as mentors for birth families from 63% to 81%. There was an even larger increase in the number of families willing to foster siblings – up from 50% to 90%. And on that great "respect factor," 86% of families report their case managers return calls promptly, and 89% say the same about their development specialists.

Today, the agency expects and encourages its foster parents to work with biological parents in caring for the youth, and Passport to Parenting even offers an entire session on co-parenting.

In addition to involving the biological parents in their children's lives, HKI has begun stressing the foster parents' role as mentors to the birth families. Whereas a few years ago biological parents remained, for the most part, voiceless in the foster care system, since the development of the QPI they have become incorporated into the mentorship process along with their children. The expectation that a foster parent help the birth family in addition to the child is communicated beginning with orientations and trainings. A mother who was often uncertain how best to care for her son, commented, "I think a foster parent would be ideal to show me the way."

Changing Training, Practice and Outcomes

Most of the CBCs are replacing the longstanding "MAPP" training with training more oriented to actual practice and the spirit of the Quality Parenting Initiative. The challenge of training, to turn platitudes into practice, is illustrated in one of the "branding" programs early in the QPI process. Led by Deb Bronson-McGrath, CEO of a branding and marketing firm called Discover TrueNorth, the series of programs is designed to help newcomers to the QPI process understand how

to “live the brand.” When participants were asked to identify one thing they could do differently to make the system better, one participant suggested that foster parents be treated as a part of the professional team and not left out. Bronson-McGrath embraced the idea but noted, “These are still concepts, and we want to break it down even more. How do we make sure we don’t leave them out?”

One answer: Return phone calls within one day. “Is that measurable? Yes,” she said. That’s what she was looking for.

The QPI process focused a lot on evaluating the system and the individuals in that system. In response to DCF concerns for some statewide standardization, representatives of all the QPI initiatives around the state got together in designing forms that case managers and foster parents would use to evaluate each other regularly. It was important that the form be clear about what information was being sought and that it reflect the same sense of honesty and respect that the QPI system itself had sought to create.

The standardization of the forms and the general evaluation process at first blush is at odds with the focus on letting each circuit create its own approaches. But mutual evaluation was important in every QPI project. There were some real advantages -- and no significant disadvantages -- in creating an evaluation process that could be applied, monitored and compared statewide. In fact, the process of accommodating different circuits’ needs seemed to have produced a more useful and user-friendly form. The evaluation process is a way to continually hold each other to the agreed-upon standards.

Similarly, the availability of online training “on demand” filled the need for ongoing reinforcement of the vision and standards while also accommodating the time constraints on the people working in the system, especially foster parents themselves. The video interviews and webinars, posted on the QPI Florida website as a growing set of “just in time” training, are available to anyone at any time they want to learn more about some aspect of foster parenting. The collection ranges from Bronson-McGrath’s programs on branding to explanations from national experts on child care, such as a program about “attachment” in children and how young children relate to biological parents and other caregivers. (The collection is online at <http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi/pages/vidmenu.aspx>.)

The commitment to ongoing reinforcement of the principles of the Quality Parenting Initiative is one of its hallmarks. Certainly it is different from the typical pattern of policy memos, new rules and procedures, and training programs -- often with little attention to the actual quality of the day-to-day work. A distinctive contribution of the QPI approach is to ensure that policies, training and everyday practice are in harmony. Shauffer’s periodic return to each circuit provides a way of keeping the pressure on the culture change, lest it drift back, to identify weaknesses,

and perhaps most of all, to help resolve problems that the group alone has not been able to resolve.

It is difficult, of course, to assess the specific impact of the QPI project amid a number of other initiatives at DCF. The major initiative to reduce the number of children who come into the foster care system certainly has relieved the problem that drove the QPI process at the beginning, the unavailability of foster homes. Florida also has outsourced much of child welfare management to lead agencies in each circuit, for example.

But the lead agencies, known as foster care care organizations, or CBCs, credit the program for better results in their circuits. “The Quality Parenting Initiative recognizes the value of our families and is crafting a new culture and expectations for parents and practitioners alike,” Mike Watkins of Big Bend CBC noted in the 2010 annual report. “We are realizing those expectations and have begun seeing the results on the faces of our youth.”

Big Bend’s 2010 annual report said foster children have more stability, for example. In fiscal 2006, more than 20% of the kids in out-of-home care lived in three or more foster homes during their first year in care. At the end of fiscal 2010, fewer than 10% had three or more placements. The number of children who remain in foster care more than 12 was reduced by 56% by June 30, 2010, from 561 down to 247.

At Heartland in Polk County, there are now “many more” positive exit interviews with children than there were two years ago, and Daugherty takes pains to reinforce the foster parents who win children’s praise. Any child over 5 years old has an exit interview upon leaving a foster home. Daugherty reviews them. “When I see all A’s, with a comment like, ‘Ms. Smith makes the best spaghetti, makes sure I had clean clothes,’ I pick up a Heartland thank-you card and write a note. ‘Ms. Smith, I just read an exit interview, we had a child in your home who really liked your spaghetti.’

“If it’s a D, ‘Ms. Jones didn’t give me my allowance,’ that’s a concern. It goes to a relicensing counselor, and there’s either a phone call, or if there’s time, they address it face to face.”

The exit interview, she says, “is so much more than that piece of paper; that’s their home. That’s what they’re telling us about their experience, and we have to take that so seriously.”

The QPI approach really could work in any category of government activity that can be improved by the concerted efforts of multiple organizations. And Florida does not seem unique in its suitability for the QPI program. A virtually identical approach in some counties in California – a state that is dramatically different from Florida in history, culture, political attitudes and government structure – is producing very similar diagnoses of the problems in the foster care system and very similar attitudes and prescriptions about how the system should change, Shauffer says.

While both Florida and California cover huge geographic territory, the QPI approach of focusing on communities means that the program is already scaled for almost any size jurisdiction. The particular issues in a thinly populated rural area might be different from those of densely populated Florida and California, but the cultures of more rural areas would, if anything, make more desirable QPI's focus on trust rather than on continual "monitoring" by bureaucracies.

Ripples

When people take responsibility for outcomes instead of just complying, they start identifying other things that need changing. QPI put kids and the quality of parenting at the center of the system. Parents were being asked to use judgment, not just to follow rules.

A result has been that other changes have rippled through Florida's child welfare system. Three major examples:

- use of a "partnership plan" with a commitment to shared principles to replace the legalistic contract to govern the caseworker-parent relationships;
- a focus on the "transition" of the children from their own homes to foster care and subsequent transfers to other foster homes, to relatives, or back to their biological families;
- a statewide initiative for greater "normalcy" in the lives of children in foster care, driven by the trusted judgments of the caregivers rather than rules focused simply on "safety."

Florida has long required foster parents to sign a "bilateral agreement" reciting expectations and standards. It is "bilateral" in the sense that it also identifies obligations of the state agency and the caseworkers, but the reality is that caseworkers and licensing staff have far more power to enforce standards against foster parents than the foster parents have against the bureaucracy. Foster parents, like most people dependent on a bureaucracy for their licenses or other support, figure that making waves is a good way to lose a license.

QPI's very different attitude, focusing on mutual obligations, brought the tone (if not the substance) of that bilateral agreement into question. So representatives of several of the QPI projects got together with Shauffer and hammered out a replacement, the "Partnership Plan." The two-paragraph preamble is worth quoting in full as an articulation of what the QPI program really is:

All of us are responsible for the well being of children in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The children's caregivers along with the Florida Department of Children and Families, foster care (CBC)

organizations, their subcontractors and staffs of these agencies undertake this responsibility in partnership, aware that none of us can succeed by ourselves.

Children need normal childhoods as well as loving and skillful parenting which honors their loyalty to their biological family. The purpose of this document is to articulate a common understanding of the values, principles and relationships necessary to fulfill this responsibility. The following commitments are embraced by all of us. This document in no way substitutes for or waives statutes or rule; however, we will attempt to apply these laws and regulations in a manner consistent with these commitments.

The document was embraced by the top leadership of the Department of Children and Families over two different administrations. In December 2010, Florida's assistant secretary for operations, Peter Digre, announced the agency's decision to replace the old bilateral agreement with the partnership and said the rules would be formally changed. In June 2011, with a new secretary under a new governor, the agency's executive director of family and community services, Jamie Self, formalized the use of all the QPI documents, including the evaluations. Self reiterated that the goal is "high quality care for every child," noted flexibility in local application of the initiative, and urged the local child welfare leaders to use the assessment documents to identify "trends or patterns" in practice.

Self also said that as part of the QPI process, local offices would be asked to assess the value of the QPI process and the need for changes in the partnership document or the evaluation tools. Thus the concept of continual improvement became incorporated in the overall management of Florida's child welfare system.

Another important spinoff of the QPI was a focus on improving children's transition from one home to another. An important element was to make the child's records, including information about the child's parents, available to the foster parents. The records not only gave the foster parents a better understanding of the child but also equipped the foster parents to work with the biological parents. "We were asking them to go the bio parents' homes, but we weren't letting them know what to expect when they got there," Shauffer says. It was not so much a policy change – foster parents were supposed to have access to the records – as a change in practice, since case managers often just didn't get around to providing the records, and foster parents simply did the best they could without making waves.

Other aspects of transitions started changing as well. Both children and foster parents are getting more notice about changes in placement; often children would be almost spirited away without notice, to the point that kids in foster care talk about leaving their belongings in Hefty bags to be ready for sudden moves. A continuing concern is the role of judges, who may order such sudden changes, and the need for an advocate to speak up for orderly transitions. "Transition occurred at the

court hearing,” one foster parent wrote in a survey about transition practices late in 2010. Among a long list of suggestions in that survey were seemingly small but caring practices, such as showing a child photographs and other information about the next home, so anxiety is reduced.

In the survey, 55% of foster parents felt involved in transitions. Some had a lot of interaction with the new caregiver. “We went to each other’s homes and went on a camping trip and to the Peanut Festival together,” one wrote. Others said they were not involved in the transition. Even some who were involved generally did not have contact with the new caregiver.

So there is work to do. It’s not that QPI has solved all the problems or perfected a system. It’s that QPI has created a reliable way for the system of foster care to govern itself and improve itself.

And then there is the newfound attention to “normalcy.” Children in foster care – especially teenagers, who are hyper-sensitive about their image in the best of circumstances – feel a great stigma in being “foster kids.” And the system made it all the more embarrassing. Former Secretary George H. Sheldon frequently noted that if a child was invited to a sleepover at a friend’s house, there was a requirement of criminal background checks on the friends’ parents.

Prompted by concerns raised in the QPI discussions, the Department of Children and Families began promoting “normalcy” for children in foster care. “I am calling on everyone in the child welfare community to make it a consistent and high priority in the months ahead to assess every decision and action by the standard of whether it treats children in foster care like every other child,” Sheldon wrote in a statewide memo in September 2010.

Reflecting QPI’s spirit of informality and common purpose, Sheldon’s was not a policy pronouncement but an appeal to common sense by the leaders of the child welfare system.

“Florida law requires rules ‘balancing the goals of normalcy and safety for the youth and providing the caregivers with as much flexibility as possible to enable the youth to participate in normal life experiences,’” Sheldon noted. “In other words, we need to act like good parents.

“Every good parent worries about the safety of their children, but they know they have to face the risks of daily life if they are to build confidence, experience and happiness. So we let them drive, play sports, go on field trips, visit friends, have friends over, go on dates. Our challenge is to give them the tools for making good decisions and acting responsibly.”

Sheldon declared the policy of the agency was that caregivers should assess a child’s activity “based upon the child’s age, maturity, abilities and interests,” and should “avoid intrusive or bureaucratic actions such as background screenings unless there is a reasonable basis” for them.

And perhaps most significantly for QPI and the foster parents, he declared that the decision “is up to the foster parent” rather than the bureaucrats. “We have licensed them for this responsibility,” Sheldon wrote. “We need to treat them like parents, with the same authority to make decisions in the best interests of their children.”

The effects then rippled out to one more part of the system – the Guardian ad Litem agency, which is independent of DCF. The newly appointed statewide director of the program, Alan Abramowitz, a former top administrator at DCF, said he would focus the work of the guardians on what he called the “NET” priorities – Normalcy, Education and Transition.

Evolution

QPI does face challenges. Its substantial reliance on individual motivation, communication and effectiveness means that it is something of a cultural island in a system that remains bureaucratic. Concepts and brands are not perpetual-motion machines. What starts as an energized culture of innovation and personal commitment decays into just a new set of procedures unless the energy is continually renewed. Even strong business organizations – with strong brands – can lose their way when founders leave the scene. The flattening and decline at Home Depot after the departure of Bernie Marcus and the stagnation at Starbucks until founder Howard Schulz returned as CEO are two prominent examples in the last decade.

That is a critical challenge for the leaders of the CBCs and for the leadership at DCF. The new secretary at DCF, David Wilkins, strongly supports the program. He and his wife, Tanya, have been caregivers themselves. Together they had an hour-long chat by webinar with foster parents around the state and shared their own appreciation for foster parents.

One challenge is doing more to ensure that the QPI approach is producing better outcomes for children. As is typical in a dynamic process, no one created statistical measures and outcomes for QPI. Daugherty at Heartland, for example, noted positive results on various measures in a survey of foster parents last year, but many of the questions related to QPI were being asked for the first time. The Big Bend CBC credited QPI for improvements in its numbers related to placements. But it is hard to know what the impact is.

The same could be said, of course, for other initiatives in Florida’s child welfare system. No one really knows, for example, whether the outsourcing to the CBCs, which started 15 years ago, has really been structurally important. At some point, you just have to create a system that applies best practices that are supported by evidence and experience, such as parental engagement with children, and let the

system be judged on whether it advances such practices. Evaluations have to rest in part on subjective judgments that this looks and feels like a better system.

And certainly to judge by the spirit in meetings of the people who have driven QPI in each circuit, it does feel like a better system.

For the older sites, it will be time to look at how it is all working in daily application. Are foster parents really getting the records they need now? Are they taking an active role in the children's education? Are foster parents leaving the system without a good reason? Are the transitions into foster care more effective? Is retention in case management and licensing improving? Is there an effect on legal challenges over licensing and the quality of care?

The new mutual assessments, which are only beginning to be implemented, will be a source of a richer understanding of what is working. And as the novelty of the new systems turns to familiarity, more attention will be given to the best practices of the system. That is where the real impact will be. That is when the "initiative" will become routine and "quality parenting" will become a hallmark of the foster care system.



QPI Sites in Florida

Florida's child welfare system is organized around the state's 20 judicial circuits. In each circuit, the Department of Children and Families contracts with a non-profit "lead agency" to manage most child welfare activities in the circuit, including case management and foster care licensing. The lead agencies are frequently referred to as "community based care" agencies, or CBCs. Participation in the Quality Parenting Initiative was voluntary for each CBC. Because of the early intensity of the process, there have been multiple "rounds" of QPI since the launch in 2008. The following list shows the name of the CBCs participating as of August 1, 2011, and the circuits and counties they cover.

Round 1

- Community Based Care of Seminole, later part of CBC of Central Florida (Circuit 18: Seminole County)
- Hillsborough Kids (Circuit 13: Hillsborough County)
- Big Bend Community Care (Circuit 2: Leon/Gadsden/Leon/Jefferson/ Liberty/ Wakulla/Franklin counties. Circuit 14: Holmes/Jackson/Washington/Bay/Calhoun/Gulf counties)

Round 2

- Eckerd Community Alternatives (Circuit 6: Pinellas /Pasco)
- Heartland for Children (Circuit 10: Polk/Hardee/Highlands)
- Family Services of Metro Orlando (later replaced by CBC of Central Florida) (Circuit 9: Orange/Osceola)
- Child and Family Connections (Circuit 15: Palm Beach)

Round 3

- Kids Central (Circuit 5: Citrus/Hernando/Lake/Marion/Sumter counties)
- United for Families (Circuit 19: Indian River/St. Martin/Okeechobee/
- Brevard Family Partnership (Circuit 18: Brevard)
- Community Partnership for Children (Circuit 7: Volusia/Flagler/Putnam)

Round 4

- Our Kids (Circuit 11: Miami-Dade/Monroe)
- Kids First of Florida (Circuit 4: Clay and Baker)
- St. Johns County Commission (Circuit 7: St. Johns)

Appendix

- Transition Survey, December 2010
- Partnership Plan, with implementing memos of December 2010 and June 2011
- Normalcy Memo, September 3, 2010
- Guardian ad Litem “Normalcy Checklist” (undated)
- Sharing Records: Cover Memo and Policy, October 29, 2010

Quality Parenting Initiative Florida Website

<http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi/pages/default.aspx>

Link to all QPI Documents

<http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi1/docs/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

Transitioning Children in Care

A Review of Practices Around the State



Department of Children and Families

December 2010

Transitions Survey Results

**A collaborative effort of the
Assistant Secretary for Operations
Assistant Secretary for Programs
and the
Quality Parenting Initiative**

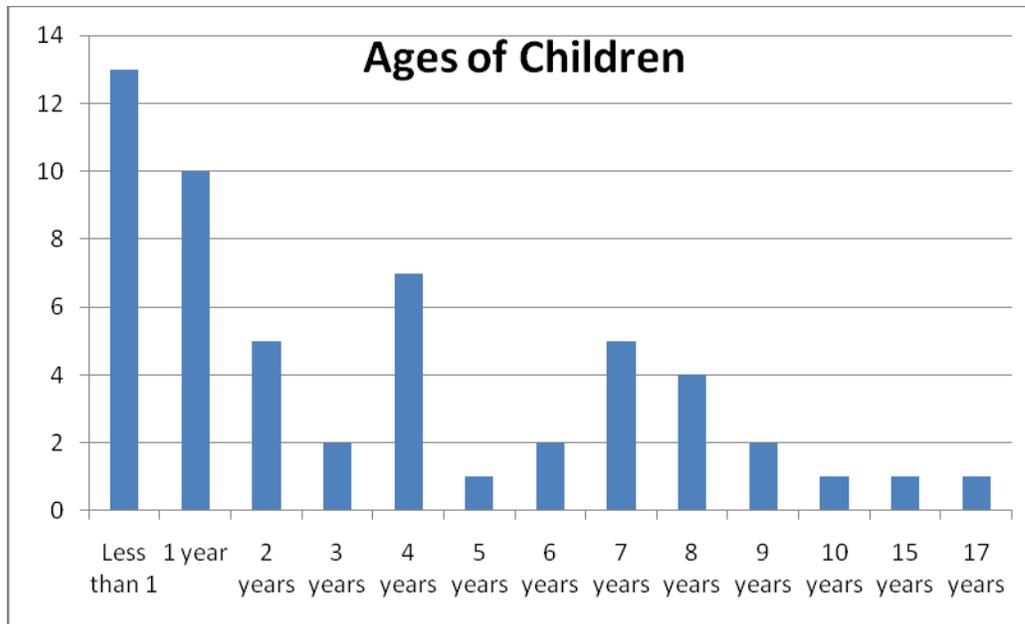
**TRANSITIONING CHILDREN IN CARE
A Review of Practices Around the State**

Following are the survey results from interviews conducted with foster parents around the state to learn about their experiences when a child is transitioned from their home to go live with a relative or adoptive parent, move to another foster home or return to the care of their parents. A series of standard questions were asked to gain additional insight on transition plans and impacts on the child and the foster family. Most importantly, we sought out their expert advice on improvements necessary to achieve practices that reflect a trauma-informed system of care.

Survey Demographics:

- 16 lead agencies were represented in the sample.
- The FSPO pulled all cases in FSFN where a transition had occurred for a child in out of home care in the recent three months to create the random sample for interviewers.
- The target child population was 0-10 years of age, although two foster parents discussed their experiences with teens.
- 54 foster parents were interviewed at length by phone:
 - 8 had 1-2 years of foster parenting
 - 15 had 3-5 years of foster parenting
 - 8 had 6-9 years of foster parenting
 - 6 had 10-12 years of foster parenting
 - 12 had 13-15 years of foster parenting
 - 5 had 16-26 years of foster parenting
- The ages of children discussed fell within this range:
 - 23 children were from birth up to 2 years of age (13 < 6 months)
 - 14 children were from 2 to 4 years of age
 - 8 children were from 5 to 7 years of age
 - 7 children were from 8 to 10 years of age
 - One teen was 15 and another was 17 years of age

Transitions Survey Results, December 2010



- The length of time a child was in the home:
 - 16 were in the home between 1 and 3 months
 - 10 were in the home between 4 and 6 months
 - 10 were in the home between 7 and 9 months
 - 5 were in the home between 10 and 12 months
 - 5 were in the home between 13 and 21 months
 - 6 were in the home for two years

FOSTER PARENTS DESCRIBE CARING FOR THEIR CHILD

Foster parents were very descriptive about the children in their home. Most of them referred to the children as loveable, easy to care for, a joy, an easy fit with the family, etc... Eight of the children had medical issues such as asthma and allergies. A significant number of children (19) had behavior issues and some foster parents did not feel they were equipped to manage the needs of the child. One foster parent reported that the child's asthmatic medical equipment has yet to be picked up by the caseworker despite phone calls to case management and another foster parent reported great frustration in learning that a follow-up medical appointment to fit the child with a necessary medical device had not occurred despite her repeated calls to case management.

INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PARENT WHILE THE CHILD IS IN FOSTER CARE

Almost three quarters of the children in the study were either going to be reunited with a parent or move to the home of a relative. Of those, 22% of the foster parents reported that they had a relationship with the biological parent while

Transitions Survey Results, December 2010

caring for their child and just over 55% did not. There is very positive receptivity from foster parents to be more engaged as mentors. Those who did not have a relationship with the biological parent reported a variety of reasons. One foster parent reported that she was strictly prohibited by the caseworker from having communication with the toddler's mother.

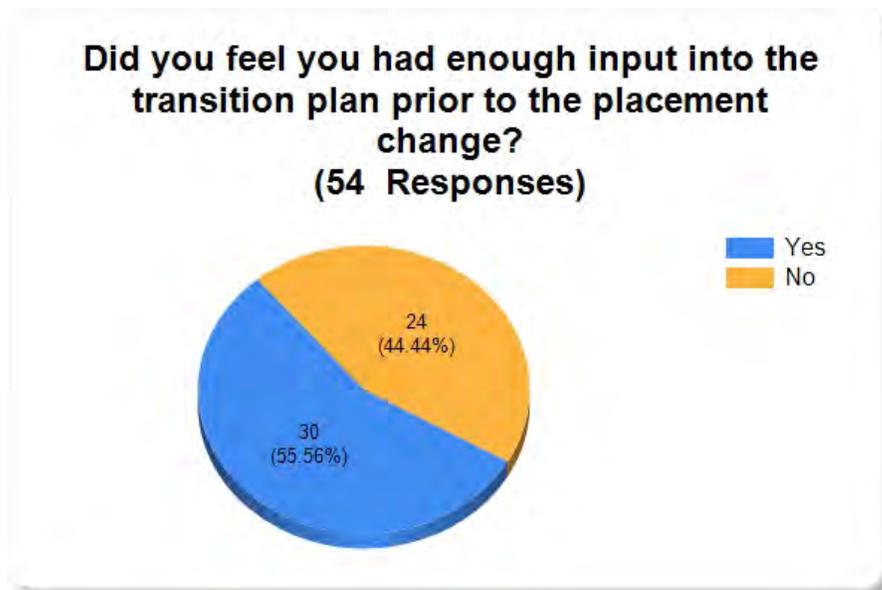
FOSTER PARENTS AND THEIR INPUT ON TRANSITION PLANS:

Over half (55%) of our foster parents reported that they felt like they were involved in planning of transition. Supporting comments such as these were offered:

- "Case manager involved me in the plan. The adoptive parents first came to my home to visit the child and then the child went to the adoptive parents home which eventually led to sleepovers."
- "All parties involved worked together closely and the gradual transition eased the child's emotions and anxiety."
- "I was able to give plenty of input."
- "Oh yes, constantly in contact..."

Foster parents who did not feel they were involved in planning of the transition had this to say:

- "...Tried to provide input but felt as though it fell on deaf ears."
- "...Tried advocating for transition plan but the caseworker wouldn't listen."
- "...Our child left for a visit and never returned."
- "...Never asked for input about the transition."



INVOLVEMENT WITH NEW CAREGIVERS AS PART OF THE TRANSITION

Foster parents were asked if they were engaged in communication with the new caregiver to assist with transitioning the child. Of the 40% who were a part of the transition planning team, here is how they describe the quality of their involvement:

“My initial call with the aunt lasted over 3 hours!”

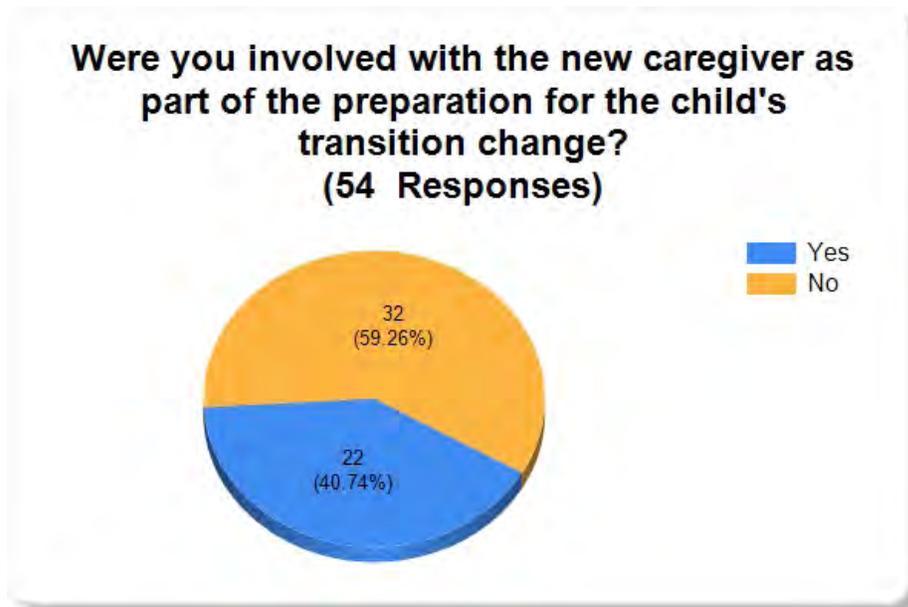
“We had meetings and spoke on the phone often.”

“Extensive involvement...we went to each other’s homes and went on a camping trip and the Peanut Festival together.”

“Phone contact and we went to parks and fun places together.”

“This was highly encouraged by the caseworker to ease the child’s anxiety.”

Approximately 60% reported that they had no contact with the new caregiver. One foster parent invited the case manager to have the relative call but nothing came of it. Two foster parents surmised that the parents may have been threatened by their relationship with the children and other foster parents reported that the system did not invite their involvement. It is interesting to note that the most positive interaction was reported between foster parents and the potential adoptive (non-relative) parent.



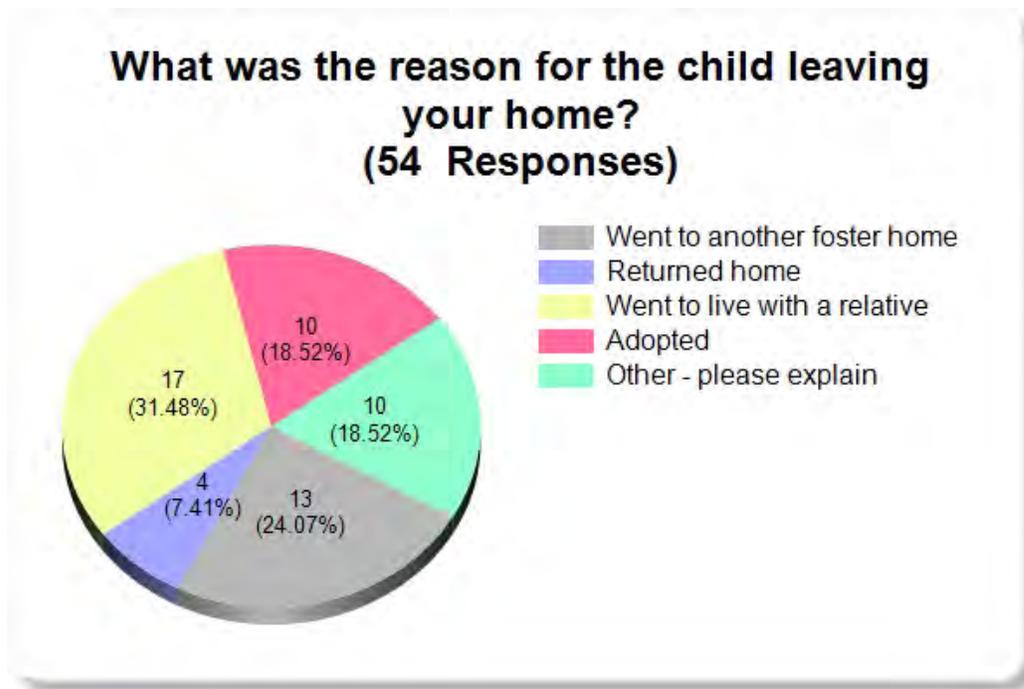
FOSTER PARENTS DESCRIBE THE PLACEMENT CHANGE

Some foster parents reported the ease with which transition planning occurs and the overall process was described as “great” because everyone involved does their part to make the transition smooth and positive for all. Some describe the placement change as cold and impersonal or harmful due to the tender

Transitions Survey Results, December 2010

developmental age of the child. One foster parent who opens her home exclusively to infants wishes the babies could have a permanent home by six months because of their growing awareness at seven and eight months of the primary caretaker. Other findings:

- 12 foster parents had very positive experiences with planned transitions. (“caseworker was very engaged with the child and with us and well as the receiving foster parent...transition occurred over a ten day period.”.....”we had daytime visits to overnights, weekends, and long weekends until fully transitioned.”)
- 14 foster parents were able to plan for their child’s move. (“we invited the relative over for dinner and on transfer day, we took the child to the relative”)
- 11 of the children were moved abruptly. (“the child left for a visit and never returned”)
- 8 foster parents had one day notice. (“transition occurred at court hearing”)



CONTACT WITH CAREGIVERS ONCE A CHILD HAS LEFT A FOSTER HOME

Many foster parents report that they had an opportunity to contact the caregiver for the child who has left their home. These appear to be arrangements made between the foster parents and the caregiver. Some know one another through community connections and see the child they cared for at church or school

Transitions Survey Results, December 2010

settings. Some describe how a relative or adoptive parent has called to offer updates and they enjoy hearing how the child is thriving. Three foster parents voiced concern over whether medical appointments were being followed through on and two foster parents feel that contact might cause emotional issues for the child or that such contact is not theirs to initiate. Overall, though, all foster parents like to be reassured that a child they loved and cared for is safe and happy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FOSTER PARENTS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- One of the most important things we can do is to give foster parents and a child ample notice of a transition.
- There needs to be better communication and workers need to take into account what a foster parent says and value their input.
- Everyone needs to be at the same table practicing group decision-making because communication is often very poor and there are many people involved but unfortunately not on the same page.
- It is important for foster parents to be able to communicate with each other and discuss a child's routines, behavior issues, etc.
- It is often judges who are expediting placements without information on the consequences of swift decisions. Who is the voice in court to offer an alternative transition proposal sensitive to the needs of children?
- There is frequently little or no medical information critical to meeting the immediate needs of a child.
- We should encourage and support open communication between foster parents and also train more foster parents to become mentors to parents so that reunification can be successful.
- There should be a central number to call and a person to trouble-shoot all medical referrals. Foster parents feel they are passed from one provider to another with no sense of accountability.
- CPIs should have a photo album of foster homes so that a child can see where they are moving to and talk about their new family in advance. It is very stressful and extremely impersonal when nobody can tell them any information whatsoever about such a significant event.

SUMMARY:

Most **foster parents were attuned to needs of the children in their care** and what was important to help those children feel safe and secure during transitions to home, relatives, or other foster parents. That said, too many children are not getting the benefit of a thoughtful transition and it is traumatic for them and their foster parents; sometimes other children in the foster home experience grief and loss over the sudden move of a "sibling" they have developed an attachment to.

Transitions Survey Results, December 2010

Many foster parents echoed themes expressed on the first statewide call with foster parents:

- Thoughtful plans are essential to help children of all ages transition and prepare to live with their new caregivers; gradually increased time and unsupervised time with new caregivers should be the norm, not the exception. One letter about the child from the current foster parent with descriptive detail and/or one conversation with the new caregiver is not a sufficient transition plan.
- Thoughtful plans are needed to help foster parents and other children in the foster home prepare for the loss of their relationships with child being moved.
- Children, new caregivers and past caregivers should have some opportunities to communicate with each other after the move occurs to ensure that the new caregiver has the benefit of past knowledge, the past caregiver can learn how the child they care about is doing, the child can talk to past foster family members they developed relationships with. There should be one follow up call at a minimum after the child's move for closure -- for child, foster parent, and new caregiver.
- Transition plans for children who have on-going special medical and/or mental health care needs should be developed collaboratively with all the team members involved (case worker, foster parent, prospective caregiver, medical and mental health professionals).
- More support of the care-giving needs of foster parents will better stabilize current child placements and eliminate the need for some moves (e.g. help with managing many medical appointments, help with problem behaviors in school and/or child care settings, help with caring for a challenging sibling group, help with the dynamics of working with a biological parents).
- Most foster parents value the opportunity to help/mentor parents, relatives or other new caregivers and know best what is important about the child's needs and special care.
- When children have close relationships with foster parents it is beneficial to give foster parents the opportunity to transport the child to their new home.
- Some case managers have done exceptional work in partnership with foster parents to plan and implement good transitions for children. This exceptional work includes making sure that judges know the recommendations about transitions from foster parents and other professionals involved.

Partnership Plan for Children in Out-of-Home Care

All of us are responsible for the well being of children in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The children's caregivers along with the Florida Department of Children and Families, community-based care (CBC) organizations, their subcontractors and staffs of these agencies undertake this responsibility in partnership, aware that none of us can succeed by ourselves.

Children need normal childhoods as well as loving and skillful parenting which honors their loyalty to their biological family. The purpose of this document is to articulate a common understanding of the values, principles and relationships necessary to fulfill this responsibility. The following commitments are embraced by all of us. This document in no way substitutes for or waives statutes or rule; however we will attempt to apply these laws and regulations in a manner consistent with these commitments.

1. To ensure that the care we give our children supports their healthy development and gives them the best possible opportunity for success, caregivers and DCF, CBC and agency staff will work together in a respectful partnership.
2. All members of this partnership will behave professionally, will share all relevant information promptly, and will respect the confidentiality of all information related to the child and his or her family.
3. Caregivers, the family, DCF, CBC and agency staff will participate in developing the plan for the child and family, and all members of the team will work together to implement this plan. This includes caregiver participation in all team meetings or court hearings related to the child's care and future plans. DCF, CBC and agency staff will support and facilitate caregiver participation through timely notification, an inclusive process and providing alternative methods for participation for caregivers who cannot be physically present.
4. Excellent parenting is a reasonable expectation of caregivers. Caregivers will provide and DCF, CBC and agency staff will support excellent parenting. This requires a loving commitment to the child and the child's safety and well being, appropriate supervision and positive methods of discipline, encouragement of the child's strengths, respect for the child's individuality and likes and dislikes, providing opportunities to develop the child's interests and skills, awareness of the impact of trauma on behavior, equal participation of the child in family life, involvement of the child with the community and a commitment to enable the child to lead a normal life.

5. Children will be placed only with caregivers who have the ability and are willing to accept responsibility for the care of a child in light of the child's culture, religion and ethnicity, special physical or psychological needs, unique situation including sexual orientation and family relationships. DCF, CBC and agency staff will provide caregivers with all available information to assist them in determining whether they are able to appropriately care for a child. Caregivers must be willing and able to learn about and be respectful of the child's religion, culture and ethnicity, and any special circumstances affecting the child's care. DCF, CBC and agency staff will assist them in gaining the support, training and skills necessary for the care of the child.
6. Caregivers will have access to and take advantage of all training they need to improve their skills in parenting children who have experienced trauma due to neglect, abuse or separation from home, to meet these children's special needs and to work effectively with child welfare agencies, the courts, the schools and other community and governmental agencies.
7. DCF, CBC and agency staff will provide caregivers with the services and support they need to enable them to provide quality care for the child.
8. Once a family accepts the responsibility of caring for the child, the child will be removed from that family only when the family is clearly unable to care for him or her safely or legally, when the child and his or her biological family are reunified, when the child is being placed in a legally permanent home in accordance with the case plan or court order, or when the removal is demonstrably in the child's best interest.
9. If a child must leave the caregiver's home for one of these reasons and in the absence of an unforeseeable emergency, the transition will be accomplished according to a plan which involves cooperation and sharing of information among all persons involved, respects the child's developmental stage and psychological needs, ensures they have all their belongings, and allows for a gradual transition from the caregiver's home and, if possible, for continued contact with the caregiver after the child leaves.
10. When the plan for the child includes reunification, caregivers and agency staff will work together to assist the biological parents in improving their ability to care for and protect their children and to provide continuity for the child.
11. Caregivers will respect and support the child's ties to his or her biological family (parents, siblings and extended family members) and will assist the child in visitation and other forms of communication. DCF, CBC and agency staff will provide caregivers with the information, guidance, training and support necessary for fulfilling this responsibility.

12. Caregivers will work in partnership with DCF, CBC and agency staff to obtain and maintain records that are important to the child's well being including child resource records, medical records, school records, photographs, and records of special events and achievements.
13. Caregivers will effectively advocate for children in their care with the child welfare system, the court, and community agencies, including schools, child care, health and mental health providers, and employers. DCF, CBC and agency staff will support them in doing so and will not retaliate against them as a result of this advocacy.
14. Caregivers will participate fully in the child's medical, psychological and dental care as they would for their biological child. Agency staff will support and facilitate this participation. Caregivers, DCF, CBC and agency staff will share information with each other about the child's health and well being.
15. Caregivers will support the child's school success by participating in school activities and meetings, including IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meetings, assisting with school assignments, supporting tutoring programs, meeting with teachers and working with an educational surrogate if one has been appointed and encouraging the child's participation in extra-curricular activities. Agency staff will facilitate this participation and will be kept informed of the child's progress and needs.

Signature of Out-of-Home Caregiver

Signature of Representative of Supervising Agency

{Signatures are requirements of F.A.C. 65C-13.030 (1)(e)}



State of Florida
Department of Children and Families

Charlie Crist
Governor

George H. Sheldon
Secretary

DATE: December 23, 2010
TO: Regional Directors
THROUGH: Peter Digre, Assistant Secretary for Operations
David L. Fairbanks, Assistant Secretary for Programs
FROM: Alan Abramowitz, State Director, Office of Family Safety
SUBJECT: Bilateral Agreement (Partnership Plan)
ACTION REQUESTED: Please disseminate broadly.
DUE DATE: January 3, 2011

PURPOSE: The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the revised bilateral agreement (Partnership Plan) for dissemination throughout your systems of care. The attached Partnership Plan and the implementation guidance were developed in collaboration with foster parents and Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) participants to be consistent with the community-based system of care in Florida.

BACKGROUND: In working with QPI sites over the last year, foster parents and staff have raised policy and program issues needing revision to support the QPI brand. The Bilateral Service Agreement (CF-FSP 5226) was one of the forms identified for updating. While the core values of the original agreement are retained, the revised document is more consistent with the community-based system of care in Florida today. A group of foster parents, youth representatives, lead agency staff, Children's Legal Services and program staff worked together to develop the new partnership framework and the implementation guidance.

Carole Shauffer, Executive Director, Youth Law Center, presented the Partnership Plan and guidance to the Department's senior leadership team on December 13 and to the statewide management team on December 17, 2010. It was agreed that the attached Partnership Plan will be a replacement for the bilateral agreement specified in 65C-13, 65C-28, and 65C-30, F.A.C. The Policy Council (a collaborative rules revision oversight group) will meet in early 2011 to consider all proposed changes to the existing child welfare rules.

ACTION REQUESTED: Please disseminate to foster parents and staff/stakeholders serving children in out-of-home care. Thank you for your continued efforts to provide high quality care.

CONTACT INFORMATION: For additional information, please contact Gay Frizzell at Gay_Frizzell@dcf.state.fl.us or at (850) 921-3005.

cc: Carole Shauffer, Youth Law Center
Jane Soltis, Eckerd Family Foundation
Mary Cagle, Children's Legal Services

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency



**State of Florida
Department of Children and Families**

Rick Scott
Governor

David E. Wilkins
Secretary

DATE: June 17, 2011

TO: Regional Directors

THROUGH: Pete Digre, Assistant Secretary for Operations

FROM: Jamie Self, Ed.D., Executive Director of Family and Community Services

SUBJECT: Partnership Plan (Bilateral Agreement) Implementation
ACTION REQUESTED: In collaboration with the CBCs in your region, implement the Partnership Plan and locally selected instruments

PURPOSE: The purpose of this memorandum is to provide information about the Partnership Plan (Bilateral Agreement) instruments and options for implementation.

BACKGROUND: In the spring of 2011, a statewide workgroup of foster parents, community-based care (CBC) and DCF staff was convened to examine practice needs, develop instruments, and compile recommendations for options for implementation of the Partnership Plan (Bilateral Agreement). Many CBC staff and foster parents participating in the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) expressed a common need. They wanted a framework for licensing, case management, and support of foster families that was consistent with a true partnership approach. The Partnership Plan (Bilateral Agreement) and accompanying assessment instruments are the resulting work products.

The documents attached to this guidance are consistent with the minimum requirements set forth in administrative code. CBC agencies are encouraged to implement a Partnership Plan process (including the minimum requirements in rule) that best meets the needs of the local system of care.

ACTION REQUIRED: In collaboration with the CBCs in your region, review the Partnership Plan and the assessment instruments described on the next page. Implement in accordance with rule and your local needs.

The first of two Partnership Plan training videos is available at:

<http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/qpi/pship/Pship.html>

A second video will be available within the next few weeks. The videos feature partners (foster parents, case managers, protective investigators, etc.) from throughout Florida's child welfare system sharing their perspectives on partnership. Regional and CBC staff are encouraged to use these videos to train parents and staff in the manner that works best for your communities.

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

Memo - Partnership Plan (Bilateral Agreement) Implementation

June 17, 2011

Page 2

Form or Assessment Instrument Attached	Policy or Optional Practice
Partnership Plan (replaces bilateral agreement)	Required by 65C-13.030 (1)(e)
Case Manager/Case Worker Review of Foster Parent (replaces Service Worker's Review of Licensed Out-of-Home Caregivers' Performance CF-FSP 5223)	Required by 65C-13.028 (1)(g)
Community Input (CF-FSP 5225) Document not attached as there are no changes from the version on DCF Forms.	Required by 65C-13.028(1)(g)
Exit Interview About Foster Parent (with child or youth)	Required by 65C-13.028(1)(h) and 65C-28.017
Foster Parent's Review of Investigator	Optional
Foster Parent's Review of Case Worker/Case Manager	Optional
Investigator Review of Foster Parent	Optional

The following factors for consideration may be helpful to your implementation:

- Our goal is high quality care for every child
- Each system of care has flexibility in implementing the plan and the instruments
- Options are provided for assessing partnership throughout the system of care (foster parents' perspectives as well as staff's and youth's perspectives)
- Instruments for assessing partnership include numerical scales and narrative comments
- Comments are especially important in assessing the child/youth perspective
- CBCs are encouraged to identify trends or patterns when assessing practice
- In early 2012 and as part of QPI, CBCs will be asked about the value of the overall partnership process and the need for changes to the partnership plan and/or the assessment instruments

CONTACT INFORMATION: If you have any questions, or for additional information please contact Gay Frizzell at 850-717-4653 or Gay_Frizzell@dcf.state.fl.us.

Attachments

cc: Barbara Palmer, Assistant Secretary for Administration
Mary Cagle, Children's Legal Services Executive Director
Carole Shauffer, Youth Law Center Executive Director



**State of Florida
Department of Children and Families**

Charlie Crist
Governor

George H. Sheldon
Secretary

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 3, 2010

TO: Regional Directors
Circuit Administrators
CBC Chief Executive Officers
CBC Board Chairs

FROM: George H. Sheldon
Secretary 

SUBJECT: Normalcy

Recently, a young person told me: "Stop calling us foster kids! We're just kids."

It's great advice, but it's not just about what we call these young people...it's how we treat them. So I am calling on everyone in the child-welfare community to make it a consistent and high priority in the months ahead to assess every decision and action by the standard of whether it treats children in foster care like every other child.

Youth in foster care should be able to do things that any other child does, within the limits of their abilities, their foster parents' own attitudes, and common sense. Their families experienced something severe enough to warrant the child's removal, and some of them need special care. Instead of continually reminding them and all their friends of this one feature of their lives, we need to focus on all the opportunities open to them. We need to think of them as the normal kids they are.

Florida law requires rules "balancing the goals of normalcy and safety for the youth and providing the caregivers with as much flexibility as possible to enable the youth to participate in normal life experiences."

In other words, we need to act like good parents.

All good parents worry about the safety of their children, but they know that children have to face the risks of daily life if they are to build confidence and character, gain life experience, and, ultimately, achieve happiness. So we let them drive, play sports, go on field trips, visit friends, have friends over, go on dates, and face new challenges every day. Our challenge is to give them the tools for making good decisions and acting responsibly.

I am not talking just about teenagers. I am talking about all children. All children are entitled to the most normal lives we can offer them.

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

Our policy is this: Every child in our care is entitled to participate in age-appropriate enrichment, extra-curricular and social activities. Caregivers should assess the appropriateness of the activity based upon the child's age, maturity, abilities and interests, but the assessment should be reasonable and avoid intrusive or bureaucratic actions such as "background screenings" unless there is a reasonable basis for doing so. Caregivers should know who their kids will be with and make provisions for their safety, but exclusion from an activity should occur only after consideration of less stringent alternatives.

The decision is up to the foster parent. We have licensed them for this responsibility. We need to treat them like parents, with the same authority to make decisions in the best interests of their children. Case managers may need to be involved on some issues of expense, and they, along with the rest of us, are there to provide counsel, support and oversight. We need to consult biological parents whenever it's reasonable, unless parental rights have been terminated. With reunification as our goal, we need to ask biological parents about their views on activities for their children and make a determination that takes their preferences into account.

We will promptly review any state or local rule, operating procedure, policy or custom that prevents or creates barriers to normalcy, including the use of terms that reflect bureaucracy rather than normal language. We invite anyone to tell us where we can improve and urge each CBC to review its own rules and practices using this guideline.

I am asking each DCF circuit administrator to work with our community partners to change practices to ensure responsible, common sense decisions by foster parents and, when involvement is necessary, by caseworkers and protective investigators.

I am designating Family Safety Director Alan Abramowitz as our "normalcy czar" to help resolve any issues that arise.

Finally, we have to stop referring to these young people as just "foster kids," and refer to them as kids or children or teenagers. They are simply children in foster care – and not for long, if we are doing our jobs well. A kid's job is to be in school, to learn from teachers, and to develop relationships through friends, peers, clubs, sports and activities since it's these skills that lay the foundation for successful lives as adults. It's what many of us experienced as we grew up and what we want for not just our own children, but for all children. Youth in care are no different.

Our decisions will not always turn out perfectly, as so many parents find with their own children, but our decisions have to be continually focused on the overall well-being of our children, not just a bureaucratic requirement or a "safe" decision.

It is the right thing for our kids.

Thank you for all you are doing to make life better for the children in our care.



FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM

Normalcy

NORMALIZATION § 409.1451(3)(A), FLA. STAT. (2009), AND NORMALCY FOR ADOLESCENTS AND TEENAGERS IN THE CUSTODY OF THE DEPARTMENT 65C - 30.007(10) F.A.C.

Children should be allowed and encouraged by the licensed out-of-home caregiver, and service worker to engage in appropriate social and extracurricular activities to promote the child's social development and maturity.

REQUIREMENTS

Participants must develop a written plan, of specific goals and objectives that promotes the child's participation in activities similar to those of non-foster care children. These opportunities shall not be withheld as a form of discipline.

PARTICIPANTS

- foster parent or caregiver, licensed out-of-home caregiver
- the child (13+), and
- the case manager

ACTION ITEMS

- Develop procedures to maximize the authority of foster parents or caregivers to approve participation in age-appropriate activities of children in their care
- Develop a written plan with participants, sign, follow
- Develop a list of age-appropriate activities and responsibilities
- Assist out-of-home caregiver and Services Worker shall assist the child in finding a driver's education program
- Support of the child's efforts to learn to drive a car
- Support efforts to obtain learner's permit & drivers license (age, maturity, insurance)

- Efforts shall be made to obtain automobile insurance
- If child wants to attend overnight or planned outings: The out-of-home caregiver must determine that it is safe & appropriate. The out of home caregiver shall:
 - Consider if there will be adult supervision
 - Be as diligent in determining approval for such events as he or she would for his or her own children, and
 - Use his or her parenting skills to familiarize himself or herself with the individual or group that the child wishes to spend time with and evaluate the child's maturity level and ability to participate in the activity appropriately
 - Criminal, delinquency and abuse/neglect history checks for dating, outings and activities with friends, families and school and church groups are not necessary for participation in normal school or community activities.
 - the services worker shall be available for consultation
- Child **must** be provided information regarding:
 - drug and alcohol use and abuse
 - teen sexuality issues
 - runaway prevention
 - health services
 - community involvement
 - knowledge of available resources
 - identifying legal issues
 - understanding his or her legal rights
 - accessing specific legal advice
- Permission and encouragement of the child to:
 - engage in appropriate social and extracurricular activities
 - obtain employment
 - have contact with family members
 - have access to phone usage
 - have reasonable curfews
 - travel with other youth or adults
- Assistance in participating in activities such as:
 - the child having his or her picture taken for publication in a newspaper or yearbook
 - receiving public recognition for accomplishments
 - participating in school or after-school organizations or clubs
 - participating in community events

REVIEW/ACCOUNTABILITY

- Written plan must be reviewed and updated no less than quarterly

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Disabled youth shall be provided with an equal opportunity to participate in Independent Living services.
- The child shall be able to participate in activities that promote personal and social growth, self-esteem and independence as long as he or she is not identified as a foster child.
- Confidentiality requirements for department records shall not restrict the child's participation in customary activities appropriate for the child's age and developmental level.
- Provided the age-appropriate activity is in a written plan developed and signed by the foster parent or caregiver, the child and the case manager, the foster parent shall not be held responsible for, or have the foster care license at risk, as a result of the child's participation in the age-appropriate activity § 409.1451(3)(a)3



State of Florida
Department of Children and Families

Charlie Crist
Governor

George H. Sheldon
Secretary

DATE: October 29, 2010

TO: Regional Directors

THROUGH: Pete Digre, Assistant Secretary for Operations *PD*
David L. Fairbanks, Assistant Secretary for Programs *DLF*

FROM: Alan Abramowitz, State Director, Office of Family Safety *AA*

SUBJECT: Sharing Case Records/Information with Foster Parents

ACTION REQUESTED: Share with staff who support children in foster family settings and with foster parents

DUE DATE: None

PURPOSE: Both staff and foster families participating in the Quality Parenting Initiative with Youth Law Center and Eckerd Family Foundation have expressed concerns about the lack of or inconsistent practice of information sharing. Children are the primary beneficiaries when their caregivers are fully informed. With that in mind, the one page attachment is intended to provide a quick summary of the legal requirements and also includes examples of the benefits of sharing records.

ACTION REQUESTED: Please share this attachment with all staff who make and support children in foster family settings including child protective investigators, licensing specialists, placement specialists, case managers and staff who provide support to foster parents. Also please share the attachment with foster parents.

CONTACT INFORMATION: For additional information, please contact Gay Frizzell at Gay_Frizzell@dcf.state.fl.us or at (850) 921-3005.

Thank you.

Attachment

cc: Carole Shauffer, Youth Law Center
Jane Soltis, Eckerd Family Foundation
Mary Cagle, Children's Legal Services
Peggy Sanford, Office of the General Counsel

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

Sharing Case Records/Information With Foster Parents

Partnership for Children in Out-of-Home Care: All of us responsible for the well-being of children in the custody of the Department undertake this responsibility in partnership, aware that none of us can succeed by ourselves. Children need normal childhoods as well as loving and skillful parenting which honors their loyalty to their biological family. In order to achieve these goals, partners must share information.

The purpose of this document is to provide simple and concise guidance consistent with Florida law and administrative code.

Legal and Policy Requirements

- The general rule is that foster parents must receive records and information, that relate to or assist in appropriately parenting their foster child except when expressly prohibited by law
- Full disclosure or comprehensive sharing of information with the foster parent is required by Florida Law and Florida Administrative Code

Benefits of Sharing Records With Foster Parents

- Being fully informed helps foster families provide high quality care for children
- Sharing of information helps to build/sustain meaningful partnerships between caseworkers and foster families
- Provides the foundation for supporting healthy relationships between foster families and biological families
- Helps to counter misconceptions and set realistic expectations about children and their biological families
- Provides the content for the child's lifebook

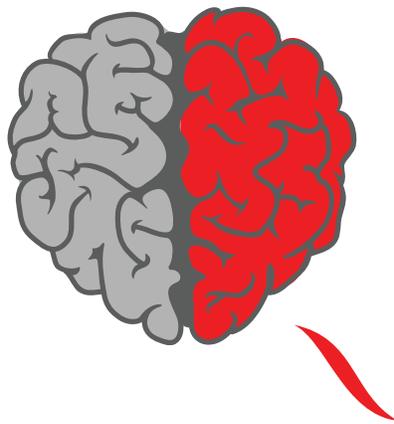
Records/Information That CANNOT Be Shared With Foster Families

- Reporter information to the Florida Abuse Hotline
- Financial records of the biological parents or any other party or participant
- HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) protected documents of the biological parents (medical reports, psychological or psychiatric reports) unless the foster parent is part of the treatment team working to achieve the goal(s) of the case plan
- Records of domestic violence centers

Examples of Records/Information That MUST BE Shared With Foster Families (this is not an all inclusive list)

- Medical, dental, psychological, psychiatric and behavioral history and on-going treatment and/or evaluation
- All court orders (shelter, adjudicatory, disposition, etc)
- Visitation and case plans
- Judicial or citizen review reports and attachments filed with the court
- Guardian ad litem reports
- Comprehensive behavioral assessments and other social assessments (may require redacting of biological parents information)
- All school records
- Copies of birth certificate and immigrant status documents
- Consents signed by the parents
- Staffing forms

If you and your supervisor/manager(s) are not sure about a particular document, ask DCF Children's Legal Services in your circuit for assistance. Please note that there may be redactions to the documents if they contain information that cannot be shared as described above.



QUALITY PARENTING

Respected **Partners**

Nurturing **Children**

Supporting **Families**

Strengthening **Communities**