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SUPPORTING EFFORTS TO RECRUIT PERMANENT FAMILIES FOR WAITING CHILDREN

FOSTER PARENT ADOPTION

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Recruiting News

970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, Minnesota 55114 • 651-644-3036 • fax: 651-644-9848 • e-mail: mariezemler@nacac.org

Helping Foster Families to Adopt: Planning to Break the Barriers

Based on the curriculum, Changing Hats: Foster to Adopt, *by Betsy Keefer of the Institute for Human Services. To learn more, call 615-215-6000 or e-mail bkeefer@IHS-trainet.com.*

For foster children, life is a revolving door. Some move through the door as they are reunited with birth families. Others spin from home to home. For some, the door stops as they are adopted by their foster parents.

Agencies used to discourage foster parent adoptions, concerned that families hoping to adopt might sabotage reunification efforts. Workers worried about losing homes as parents adopted then stopped fostering, or worse, if they continued, that the remaining foster children would be adversely affected. Fears about the impact of openness—when the birth family knew who had the child—abounded.

Fortunately, foster parent adoptions are increasing as agencies recognize their tremendous benefits:

- **Families make informed decisions.** Foster families nurture foster children during difficult times. They experience moments of joy, but also encounter trying times that test their relationship with each child. Parents have firsthand knowledge about the child's medical, emotional, and behavioral needs. Their commitment is not based on expectations of the dream child, but grounded in reality.
- **The child and family are already attached.** If a child has established a loving relationship with her foster family, has built positive peer and school relationships, and senses acceptance from the extended family and friends, why should her life be disrupted? By becoming a permanent member of the known family, the child gains a sense that she is safe and secure, and can trust people in her world.
- **Foster parent adoptions embrace openness.** During reunification efforts, the family becomes acquainted with the birth parents and learns about issues that may be of future concern. This information can prove valuable in later years. Since the foster family establishes a history with the child, the birth family also has a higher degree of comfort regarding the placement decision.
- **Foster parent adoptions expedite permanency.** The time a child spends in foster care applies to the required six-month wait for finalization. A joint foster care/adoption certification process shortens preparation time for an adoption even further. When the agency knows the family, the groundwork is already laid.

Despite the benefits, all too often foster parent adoptions happen by default with little planning. Workers and foster parents must address the barriers to adoption—some of which are listed in the chart on the following page—and plan effective, long-term solutions.

Waiting Children

Martha, Alisha, & Margaret
age 8 age 11 age 7

Alisha, born February 17, 1989, is a giving child who likes to mother her younger sisters Martha (born April 12, 1992) and Margaret (born June 8, 1993). The girls enjoy bicycling, putt-putt golfing, and playing uno together.

Polite and well mannered, Alisha works hard in fifth grade and particularly enjoys reading. She is popular and makes friends easily. Alisha is also an active girl scout. She is beginning to spend time independently and desires to appear more grown up.

Martha is an outgoing second grader with a smile for everyone. She is a book-loving honor student who leads in every group. Martha sometimes talks too much in class, and acts stubborn or pouts when she can't have her way. Although some classmates find her bossy, she is a sweet and loving child.

A delightful, affectionate first grader, Margaret can be shy until she gets to know people. She is in an advanced program at her school, as she is a bright honors student who loves to learn new things. Her teachers note that she is eager to please and a good helper. Margaret is popular with her classmates and shares easily with others. She and Martha often play together and especially enjoy their Spice Girls dolls.

These sisters need a loving adoptive family where they can grow up together. To learn more, contact Jessica or Tonya of Alabama Family Finders at 800-926-8887.

Barriers to Foster Adoptions	*Solutions*
The family is "good enough to foster, but not to adopt." Constrained by emergency planning and high caseloads, workers sometimes place children with foster parents who cannot provide for the children's long-term needs. Parents may be unwilling or unable to recognize the responsibilities of a transracial placement. Siblings may be separated. Foster parents may be reluctant to commit to parenthood again later in life. If these placements are only temporary, workers might rationalize their hurried decisions. But when the plan becomes adoption, the child is attached to a family who cannot provide a permanent home.	**Increase "front-door" planning.** In an era of ever-increasing adoptions, placing children with families who clearly are unsuitable to meet their long-term needs is ludicrous. Workers must remember that any placement may become permanent—a family that is not good enough to adopt is also not good enough to foster. Workers who plan well never need to judge which is of greater significance: maintaining connection to a family versus continuing cultural heritage or keeping siblings together or finding parents who can see the child into adulthood.
Lack of subsidy. Foster parents often receive board rates that far exceed what can be guaranteed at the time of adoption. Some agencies are unwilling or unable to enter into a financial agreement that would equalize this discrepancy, thus adversely affecting a family's ability to adopt a child who has special needs.	**Provide subsidy information.** Many foster families experience a drop in income as a result of adoption. While the maintenance rate for the child may plummet, creative workers can assure that families receive financial reimbursement for special services needed by the child, now and in the future.
Assumptions that foster parents do not need information. Because foster parent adoptions are less labor intensive, workers sometimes assume that the foster parents have enough information and support. Workers may not do a thorough job of preparing the family for permanency, advising about specific birth family issues, and discussing adoption-related issues that affect adoptees into adulthood.	**Review complete information on the child and post-adoption services.** Do not assume that foster parents have received all critical information—share everything about the child and his prior history so they can make an educated decision. Familiarize them with supportive services available for adoptive families: support groups, associations, therapists, training opportunities, etc.
Pressure by the agency. Families who are forced to keep children permanently are less likely to experience success with the adoptive placement. Occasionally, foster parents feel an obligation to adopt children in their care to avoid their own guilt and spare the child the pain brought on by another move. Obligation and pressure are two parts of an equation that leads to an eventual failure.	**Help the family make their decision on sound criteria.** Use the Strengths & Needs Worksheet (see *Tip Sheet*) to assess the family's preparedness for adoption. In addition, while families are often active in foster parent associations, they may not be connected to the adoption community. Get them involved in groups that provide education and networking for adoptive families. Reinforce that post-adoption services are normal, not an indication of failure.
The family cannot handle a change in role/entitlement. The foster family may demonstrate difficulty in assuming their role as the child's permanent family. Perhaps they are overly dependent on the agency; display an attitude that says "you owe me ongoing financial support"; or fail to see the permanency of their commitment. Foster care is occasionally viewed as a job, and changing that into a relationship might be a challenge.	**Plan a rite of passage at finalization.** Ensure that the child and family understand and commit to the significance of the move to adoption even when no physical move occurs. Plan a party, plant a tree, take a family portrait with the new member, or celebrate within the religious community. Friends and extended family also need to understand that the child is a permanent part of the family system—some parents like to send adoption announcements.
The child does not handle a change in status well. Sometimes workers take for granted that a child who is adopted by his foster family needs little preparation. However, this is not always the case—he may still believe that his life is not completely secure in his new home, especially if the family continues to foster other children. Many foster children are understandably torn by divided loyalties to their birth and adoptive families. Often they resist adoption shortly before finalization.	**Help the child make the foster-to-adoption transition.** The family should expect cold feet prior to finalization, and must not overreact. Discuss the child's fears. Help him to understand that his relationship to—not his feelings about—his birth family is changing. Try to obtain permission from the birth parent or another relative for the child to be adopted. The relative should communicate to the child that he is loved, will be remembered, has permission to succeed with his new family, and is wished a happy future.

Techniques for a Smoother Foster-to-Adoption Transition

- *Include the child in decision-making whenever developmentally possible.*
- *Determine whether to maintain relationships with siblings or other kin, and explain to the child when and how visitation will occur.*
- *Explore the impact of the adoption with birth, foster, and adopted children who live in the home.*
- *Add to the child's lifebook before and after the adoption, and encourage the family to keep it accessible to the child.*
- *Discover and eliminate the child's misconceptions by asking open-ended questions: "What do you know about adoption?" or "What is the hardest thing about being a foster child?"*

"Ask the Expert"

Q I work with a child who is now free for adoption. Who should talk to her foster family about adoption? When should the discussion take place? What ought to be said?

A Foster parents who have close, lengthy relationships with their worker are much more likely to say "yes" to the adoption, so the worker with the deepest relationship with the foster parents should talk to them. To avoid coercion, the discussion should take place where the foster parents have sufficient control and power. Their home may be an excellent location, if distractions can be minimized. During this—and all—discussions, the worker should be honest, direct, and supportive. Foster parents who ultimately adopt most likely considered adoption early in the placement. Consequently, a good question to start with is, "Have you thought about adopting the child?"

Q One of my foster families is hesitant about adopting a child who is now in their home. How can I help them make their decision without undue pressure?

A Honesty and candor are critically important. Give foster parents every opportunity to ask questions about the child and supply as much information as possible about the child's family of origin, placement history, attachment history, experiences with loss and grieving, as well as any special needs. The adoption process creates stress and crises—review techniques for coping with the family as a whole and with individual members. Discuss the post-adoption supports available, including the adoption subsidy program. Assure foster parents that if they decide not to adopt, their relationship with the child does not have to end. They can help the child successfully transition into an adoptive family and even become extended family members.

Q Although the foster parents want to adopt their foster daughter, I believe a different family could better meet her long-term needs. But should I remove a child from a loving home?

A If a child is attached to a family, and that family is committed to the child, trust that they have strong building blocks for a successful adoption. That the parents and child consider themselves a family is more important than any unfounded fears about the parents' ability to provide for the child's long-term needs. The caveat is to be honest about your apprehension. Ask the foster parents to describe their most significant about concerns the adoption as well as the individual and collective family strengths that will help them in the tough times ahead. The Strengths & Needs Worksheet (see *Tip Sheet*) can help.

To contact this issue's expert, Heather Craig-Oldsen, M.S.W., of the Child Welfare Institute, call 402-755-2864 or e-mail hco@compuserve.com.

Next Up...

Upcoming Trainings, Conferences, and Events

Aug. 30–Sept. 2 · Washington, DC

Growing Pains 2000 is the 13th Annual National Independent Living Conference for Adults and Youth co-sponsored by the **National Independent Living Association (NILA)** and **daniel®**; Davia Isleib, 904-296-1055, ext. 1013, www.danielkids.org.

September 13–15 · Yakima, WA

The **Foster Parents Association of Washington State (FPAWS)** presents *Foster Care Conference 2000: Better Skills for Stronger Families*; 425-485-7776.

October 5–7 · Minneapolis, MN

The **Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children (ATTACh)** sponsors the *12th Annual International Conference on Attachment and Bonding*; Denise Lacher, 612-475-2818, denise@familyattachment.com, www.attach.org.

October 10–13 · Washington, DC

Our Children in a Global World is the 30th annual conference of the **National Black Child Development Institute**; 800-556-2234 or 202-387-1281, www.nbcdi.org.

November 2–4 · Columbus, OH

Permanency for All Children is the Ohio Statewide Adoption and Foster Care Conference 2000; Elizabeth Long, 614-443-1877, blong@rrcol.com.

Bulletin Board

NACAC DISTRIBUTES ADOPTION MONTH POSTERS

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)—in cooperation with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Wendy's International—will build public awareness and recruit families for waiting children during November through their annual Adoption Month poster project. In a departure from previous years, this year's children—76 from 46 states and the District of Columbia—will be featured on one of two posters, for eastern and western regions of the United States. Both posters, titled "A Child Is Waiting…for You," will include the National Adoption Center's toll-free phone number and will be displayed in Wendy's restaurants, libraries, military family centers, human services agencies, and child care facilities during November. NACAC's goal is to display the posters wherever families eat, work, play, and pray. To order free copies of one or both 2000 Adoption Month posters for display in your agency, office, or community, contact Marilee Reu at 651-644-3036 or marilee@nacac.org.

"Despite all the foster families that I lived with, I never knew what a family was about until I was adopted. In foster care, the foster children are always on the perimeter of the family. After my adoption, I finally felt on the inside—sharing my family's goals, responsibilities, love, and warmth—none of this was available to me in foster care."

Renee—adopted at age 22

Guidebook Discusses Raising Foster Children

Written by pediatrician Susan McNair Blatt with input from foster families, *A Guidebook for Raising Foster Children* (2000) is intended for foster parents and others involved in the foster care system. The book describes common problems and behaviors of foster children and offers suggestions for handling them. To order, contact Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. at 800-225-5800 or 203-226-3571, or visit http://info.greenwood.com.

"Unofficial" Book Offers Adoption Information

The coordinator of the Vermont Adoptive Parent Support Network, author Andrea Della Vecchio, provides information on the length of time and cost to adopt, components of a home study, and challenges for single, gay, lesbian, and older parents. *The Unofficial Guide to Adopting a Child* (2000) also offers tips on questions to ask and to avoid with agencies and birth parents. This book is available in bookstores.

Story Aims to Help Foster Children Understand

Cynthia Miller Lovell's *The Star: A Story to Help Young Children Understand Foster Care* (1999) is a set of two books: a question-and-activity guide for foster parents and a picture book for children. The book tells young Kit's story of being placed in a foster home and how her foster parents, her caseworker, and a star above help her with the transition. To order, contact Tapestry Books at 800-765-2367 or visit www.tapestrybooks.com.

Book Examines State of Foster Care System

The Foster Care Crisis: Translating Research into Policy and Practice (1999) is a reference and guide for improving the foster care crisis—too many children who are in the system too long. The book, edited by Patrick Curtis, Grady Dale, Jr., and Joshua Kendall, describes the special needs of foster children, as well as the policies and practices that impact them. Foster care researchers and practitioners have contributed their findings to this resource. To order, contact CWLA at 800-407-6273 or cwla@pmds.com, or check out www.cwla.org/pubs.

Video Helps with Learning Differences

Parenting Children with Learning Differences: LD, AD/HD (1999) features parents who talk about their experiences dealing with a child who has a learning disability (LD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)as well as a group discussion led by a psychologist. Edited by Susan Green and produced by Sunburst Technology, this video includes a guide and tip-filled handouts for parents and children to help them work with LD or ADHD and succeed. To order, contact Sunburst Technology, 101 Castleton St., Pleasantville, NY 10570; 800-431-1934; web: www.sunburst.com.

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