

# While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

OCTOBER 2004

## *Concurrent Planning: Making a Promise to the Child*

Concurrent planning makes a promise to the child: When you enter foster care you will be placed with only one family and that family will see you through reunification with your family, or if reunification is not safe or possible, the foster family will adopt you.



Since concurrent planning is in practice across Minnesota, prospective foster and adoptive parents need to understand the practice and decide if it is an option for them. Like many others in the 1980s, Linda Katz, a social worker and former director of Lutheran Social Services of Washington and Idaho, grew increasingly disturbed by the number of young children who seemed trapped in foster care, drifting from one foster family to another, some with double digit placements. To help shorten a child's length of stay in foster care and to guarantee a permanency plan, Katz developed the social work practice of concurrent planning for the more difficult cases involving children eight years old and younger. Caroline Stevens from child foster care licensing in Hennepin County highlights the main premise of concurrent planning: "It is in the best interests of children to have their first placement be their last."

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A concurrent plan means two simultaneous plans begin when a child enters foster care: a plan for reunification with the family and a plan for adoption if reunification is not possible. In Minnesota, foster families who agree to take on a concurrent plan are called resource families.

Katz notes that one of the benefits of concurrent planning is that it lets "the risks of loss, insecurity, and anxiety rest on those most able to bear them: the adults rather than the child." Social workers seeking concurrent planning families are looking for foster families who will share the burden of living with the ambiguity of not knowing whether the child will return to the birth family, be adopted by kin, or be adopted by them. Although this is a hard task, everyday foster children live with the stress of not knowing what the future holds for them and also not having any say about it. In a sense, resource parents are asked to share the feelings of loss and uncertainty with the child.

The first priority in a concurrent plan is to help the birth parents meet their requirements to reunify with their children. In most cases birth parents do comply and their children return to them. One of the diffi-

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cult parts of resource parenting is keeping in mind that the placements are *foster* placements. Since adoption is always a possibility, many resource parents say there is the temptation to prematurely fantasize about adopting, especially when they begin to form a strong attachment to the child.

Barb Fischer, an adoptive parent and liaison for Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation (MN ASAP) explains, “[a resource parent’s] job is to work toward reunification and they need to make sure they really understand that. I tell families ‘You have to put all your energy into reunification when your heart is going in the other direction. You have to do that, and then you have to be able to make the change [if reunification efforts don’t work].’”

Mary McGowan, a resource developer for the Minnesota Recruitment Project and a mother of three adopted girls, says that her children help keep her honest about placements. When her kids get excited about the arrival of a new foster child and ask, “Can we keep the baby?” she explains about the child’s birth parents and how their family is only helping out for a little while. When she tells her children the truth, it helps her stay focused on her mission and reduces thoughts of adoption.

Katz has seen all kinds of adults become excellent resource parents, including single people, married couples, gay families, young parents, middle-aged and late middle-aged parents, people who have never parented before, and parents who have had lots of kids. She has even seen families who have lost a child through death be very successful, possibly because of the lessons they have learned about parental powerlessness, self-care, and their reliance on an inner strength.

There is no better indicator for adult success as resource parents, says Katz, than gauging a parent’s ability to effectively cope with stress and deal with situations that cause anxiety. She says prospective resource parents need to examine how well they tolerate anxiety and what they do in anxious situations. She adds that it is especially important for them to look at chronic anxious situations they have experi-

enced, such as worrying about money or health or worrying about a family member who is having a problem that cannot be solved right away.

“Prospective [resource parents] will have to live with anxiety for a period of time,” Katz says. “Some people do better with that than others. Nobody likes it, but some people get physically ill from it and some



people get depressed or angry. Some people fight with their partner or blame the agency, or blame the birth parents for the situation they are involved in with a placement; when basically, living

with anxiety is what they are signing up for.”

“And they’re doing it for a good reason.” Katz adds. “They’re doing it because that’s the way we prevent the child from having all the terrible anxiety and not knowing how

many foster homes they’re going to live in for the next two years. So there is a reason they are taking this on, but it’s still hard.”

Prospective parents should also think about what support they have from family, friends, their religious faith, a partner, or parent support group. They should also take a careful look at their personal characteristics and needs.

“Some really terrible cases, where the resource family endured a great deal of stress, were successful because the resource parents developed ways to live with the stress, were calm, or calm enough, and found creative ways to handle it,” observes Katz.

Katz has also seen some easier cases (from the point of view of an agency or county) where the resource parents found things so difficult they quit within the first three months. She believes success is not based on the case, but rather the people involved.

“Sometimes people who have a strong religious faith use it personally on a daily basis through prayer and reflection. They have a conviction that they will survive whatever they are facing,” says Katz.



“Other people have an enormous humor about life and just say to themselves, ‘Well I signed up for this so, you know, I’m going to get through it and we’re going to look on the bright side. A lot of what we experience will strike us as funny,’” she adds.

Preparing your friends and family for your role as a resource parent and acknowledging that it will be rewarding—and hard—is a good idea. Katz suggests that resource parents come right out and say to their support network, “It might be awful and I might hate it sometimes, but I hope you’ll be there for me. I may need to come over and cry or come over and scream about the dumb social worker or the difficult visits with a birth parent. And please don’t tell me, ‘You asked for it.’ Take me to a movie. Please, take me out running. Do something. Help me with this.”

A regular exercise program is also helpful for relieving stress and improving mental health, and Katz emphasizes the importance of scheduling time to do the exercise activity you enjoy the best every day.

Becoming a mentor to the birth family is another common role for resource parents. It is a powerful experience to share parenting techniques and help birth parents regain confidence and improve their parenting skills. Not all resource parents are able to do it well or do it in every case, but when it works it’s extremely beneficial to the child.

McGowan says that witnessing the love between the birth parent and the child is what hooks her to want to mentor birth parents. Watching a child cry all the way home after a visit with his mom motivates her to want to help that relationship for the sake of the child.

Katz has noticed that some resource parents “have a natural sympathy for the underdog—and most of these parents are underdogs. If you put a real kind and nurturing person in the same room with them, sometimes it just happens that they take on kind of a maternal or parental role.”

Barb Fischer adds, “It is important for foster parents to show respect toward birth parents so that the children can continue to respect their parents.” Connie Hesse, also an adoptive parent and liaison for MN ASAP adds, “No one has the right to judge birth parents.” She believes they love their children deeply, but for some reason—maybe due to health problems, a trauma, or possibly their upbringing—something went wrong.

To understand the role of a resource parent, Katz draws a parallel between resource parenting and step-parenting. Like step-parents, resource families find themselves in a relationship “where the child loves another set of parents. [Those parents] won’t go away. They may not have always been the best set of parents, or be very reliable. They may not come to all the visits. They may have harmed the child. But the child loves them because that’s just how the kids are. They love the parents they have. They can love you too, but they will still love their parents.”

Hesse adds, “You can’t expect kids to forget about their history, because it’s not going to happen.” Her daughter came to her one night and poignantly asked why someone couldn’t do something now to help her birth mother before she dies. Like any other child, a foster or adopted child’s feelings run deep for their birth parents.

To prepare for their role, Katz has found that more than anything prospective resource families appreciate hearing from experienced resource families. Katz believes that along with telling the rewarding aspects, experienced families need to “share how they felt—how upsetting it was, how angry they got, how it made two partners fight, how one did better than the other, how they despaired at times, how they wished they hadn’t done it at times.”

“I think, in addition, families should hear from at least one family who had a child they wanted to keep but couldn’t—where the child went back to a birth parent,” adds Katz. “They need to see how much it hurt, but that these people survived, because it could happen to them. We’re making the child a promise, but we’re not making [the parents] a promise.” ♥



## Tips from Experienced Resource Parents



Resource parents from around Minnesota offered the following tips to help others who are considering becoming resource parents. First and foremost, you should think about your personality and your family's needs as you decide if resource parenting is right for you.

### Tips to help you decide:

- ♥ Tell your licensing agency that you are willing to become a respite care provider. You will learn what it is like to parent children for a short time and return them to another caregiver. You will also most likely meet foster children, foster and adoptive parents, and birth parents.
- ♥ Attend or join a foster parent/adoption support group to learn from other parents. Listen to group members, ask questions, and learn how they cope with family stress.
- ♥ Seek out local resource parents who might be willing to talk with you or let you come over to see what a day in their life is like.
- ♥ Attend as much training as you can on topics such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), attachment, other special needs topics, working with birth parents, and more.
- ♥ Read books about foster parenting and adoption. Some parent support groups have lending libraries and can make excellent recommendations on what to read. Local libraries and bookstores also carry excellent books. Check out MN ASAP's and NACAC's web sites for free educational materials: [www.mnasap.org](http://www.mnasap.org) and [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org).
- ♥ Talk to your local Minnesota Recruitment Project parent resource developer. She may be able to help you meet other resource parents or contact them by phone or e-mail. Ask questions and learn more about the needs in your region. Call NACAC for contact information.

### Things to keep in mind once you decide to become a resource parent:

- ♥ Line up daytime help before you get a referral (especially if you might take in sibling groups). One parent lines up a baby sitter to help out in the afternoons even before she gets a referral. When she gets a placement she calls the sitter and has an extra pair of hands right away during the hectic time when she guides after-school play,

listens to school concerns, helps with homework, and prepares dinner.

- ♥ Find someone who is willing to do respite care even if you won't use it right away. If you ask extended family members or friends to serve as respite care providers, have them attend training with you so they can learn how to successfully handle children with special needs.
- ♥ In your current relationships, practice now how *not* to take things personally when you experience relationship conflict. Traumatic events precipitate children being separated from their birth families and everyone involved experiences intense feelings. You will need lots of practice not personalizing misdirected anger, frustration, and pain.
- ♥ Remember when you take a placement that it is a foster placement. Be clear that the child you are caring for has a birth family and most likely will return to the birth family. How you help that family will affect the child and the family for the rest of their lives.
- ♥ Be open to meeting the birth parents and establishing a relationship with them as soon as possible. A visitation plan will be coordinated by the county social service agency, with input from birth parents and resource parents. Be prepared to participate in the visitation plan and, with the agreement of the county social service agency, serve as a mentor for the birth parent. Be willing to have contact with extended family. These people are important to the child, so make them important to you.

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