Redlich Horwitz Foundation

Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory

Our Mission **We believe that every child in foster care deserves a loving, stable family in order to achieve a productive, secure, and personally fulfilling adulthood.**

Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory

There is widespread agreement in the child welfare field that children in foster care should be with loving and nurturing families to achieve strong permanency and well-being outcomes. Whenever possible, this family should include kin – a relative or other adult that knows the child well, such as family friends, neighbors, or godparents. Federal and state laws include a strong preference for kinship care, and research confirms that children do best in placements with someone they know and trust. In fact, across the country 30% of children in foster care live with kin families, and some jurisdictions far surpass that number.

When kin are not available to step in, children need foster parents who are well prepared to address their traumatic experiences and committed to helping them return to their parents. While a small percentage of children may need short-term residential treatment to address social, emotional and behavioral challenges, it is well established that a family environment is better for children in foster care. A high-functioning foster care system is structured and funded in a way that strives to make the first placement a kin placement and to recruit, develop, and support the best possible foster parents for children who cannot safely live with their parents.

This best practice inventory represents consensus from the field about the key steps needed to find and keep amazing kin and non-kin foster parents. It includes approaches that are both innovative and practical, and can be easily adapted to suit agencies that acknowledge foster parents as the backbone of a system that helps children grow into healthy and productive adults.

Identify and Engage Kinship Caregivers for a Child's First Placement

Federal and state laws require child welfare agencies to find and consider kin first when making foster care placement decisions. In fact, some jurisdictions explore family resources as soon as a case is indicated to ensure the first placement is with kin. Yet too often, it is easier to place children with foster parents who are already licensed or in a congregate care facility with an open bed. Placement with a relative is not re-visited until there is a crisis. By this time, children have experienced the trauma of being removed from their parents, compounded by one or more disruptions, making relative placements even more challenging.

Some child welfare agencies do well at using technology to locate family but do not fully embrace the critical engagement process necessary to solidify kin placements and connections. Engaging kin families is different from engaging foster parents. When done well, kin-specific strategies can make all the difference in placement stability and the child's well-being. Support for this unexpected arrival can include providing early material supports, such as beds, clothes, and food; helping families manage the changes in their relationship with the child and other members of the family; coaching families to maintain safe boundaries with the child's birth parents; and managing expectations regarding the child's return home. Strong connections with kin families also recognize that every relative or kin has an important relationship to the child, even if placement is not possible.

Best practice strategies for identifying and engaging kin in a child's first placement:

▸ Utilize family search and engagement (FSE) strategies at the start of a case
▸ Develop a kinship firewall to make it harder to make a non-kin placement
▸ Use search engines, social media, genograms and other resources to complement family engagement
▸ Send relative notification letters as required by federal law

▸ Utilize family search and engagement (FSE) strategies at the start of a case

FSE is an umbrella term that encompasses various models for finding and engaging extended family for children in foster care. These models should be applied at every stage in the child welfare continuum – when children: first become involved with the child welfare system; come into foster care; face placement disruptions; or become legally free for adoption. Some developers of the models described below offer training for staff, although some jurisdictions have adapted the principles from these models to create their own, homegrown efforts.

» **Six Steps to Finding a Family |** Developed by the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, this guide is widely used by child welfare agencies to follow the family finding and engagement process. The guide outlines system-wide and comprehensive strategies for child welfare agencies to implement, including conducting a self-assessment, developing staff buy-in, and tracking data on youth in need of a permanent family. The guide also includes concrete examples, sample scripts, and guidance to tackle questions about FSE strategies and ways to overcome practice barriers. Download the guide here.

» **Family Finding |** In 1999, psychologist Kevin Campbell developed the Family Finding model, which involves intensive relative search and engagement techniques to identify kin for children involved in the child welfare system. The model engages youth and their families in developing supports and a permanent plan for the youth. Learn more about the model here.

» **Family Search and Engagement (3PLLC) |** 3PLLC is a national consulting firm that specializes in training and curriculum development to support youth permanency through effective family search and engagement. They have produced a number of resources to educate agencies on the importance of engaging family at every entry point into the child welfare system. View their resources here.

» **30 Days to Family |** 30 Days to Family was created by the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition in Missouri following the success of their Extreme Recruitment model, which finds relatives for children in need of permanency using intensive team planning and private investigators. The program's goal is to locate at least 80 family members for children within their first 30 days in foster care. The model utilizes tools such as genograms, technology, and family engagement to locate family members. Learn more here.

▸ Develop a kinship firewall to make it harder to make a non-kin placement

Some jurisdictions have created an infrastructure, sometimes called a firewall, to require a higher level of approval for non-kinship placements. In Tennessee, for example, the State requires the use of a Kinship Exception Request, a statewide form that must be reviewed and approved by a regional kinship coordinator or program manager before case managers can make a non-kin placement.   This firewall not only makes it harder to make a non-kin placement, but also creates a stronger team within the agency that works together to consider all kin resources for the child.
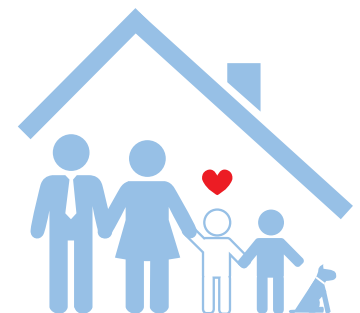
▸ **Use search engines, social media, genograms and other resources to complement family engagement**

FSE strategies typically include the use of search engines, social media, school emergency contacts, and more. These resources can be used in conjunction with interviews with youth and birth parents to identify important people in their lives who can serve as a placement resources and supportive connections. Staff should be available after-hours to account for emergency circumstances and to identify kin as soon as possible. Agencies find it helpful to have dedicated staff that can devote time to intensive searches for family members who may be more difficult to locate.

» **Search engines |** Free basic searches can be accessed at pipl.com, zabasearch.com, and whitepages.com. Paid subscription searches include Lexis Nexis, Accurint, and ancestry.com.

» **Government databases |** If relatives have relied on government assistance, they can be located through local and national databases that collect information on receipt of government services. Examples include the Federal Parent Locator Service, food assistance, public assistance, or Social Security benefits. The ability to access these databases typically requires a memorandum of understanding with the agency that manages the information.

» **Social Media |** Facebook users connect "friends" who can be identified as relatives or other important connections in a child's life. Other social media applications that track people's relationships include Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat.

» **Emergency school contacts |** The Baltimore County Department of Social Services developed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between their agency and the local school system to access the emergency contacts identified by parents for potential connections for children in foster care.

» **Genogram |** Genograms are graphical representations of a family tree and its interconnected relationships. The DC Child and Family Services agency uses genograms as a resource to identify family members for youth entering care. At the start of family team meetings, the team draws a genogram to understand the family dynamics and connections and then uses the information in the genogram to inform planning for the child.

▸ **Send relative notification letters as required by federal law**

The Fostering Connections Act requires child welfare agencies to provide notice to all known relatives within 30 days of placement. Best practice suggests that this notice be written and that agency staff follow up with phone calls or visits.

» **Model notice letters |** The model relative notice letter uses simple and engaging language and stresses the importance of the child remaining connected to family. It also includes information about the relative's options for next steps to be considered as a placement resource or connection for the child. Download the model notice letter here.

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BEST PRACTICE #2

Recruit Excellent Foster Parents

Most jurisdictions are facing a shortage of foster parents available for children in care who cannot be placed with kin. Child welfare agencies can no longer rely on general recruitment (i.e. billboards and public service announcements) to create a steady supply of qualified foster parents. Successful foster parent recruitment requires a data-informed and targeted approach that relies on the best information available on the children in foster care, the status of the current pool of foster families, and the types of new foster families needed to meet the unique needs of children in care. Recruitment also requires a diverse set of messages and messengers on the realities and rewards of foster parenting.

The National Resource Center on Diligent Recruitment developed a useful guide, Developing Recruitment Plans: A Toolkit for States and Tribes that describes both short-term and long-term recruitment plan guidelines. Welfare Research Group also has a guide, Revitalizing Recruitment, which highlights practical strategies for recruitment.

Strategies to bolster recruitment include:

▸ Clearly understand the characteristics of children in an agency's care

▸ Conduct a foster family utilization review to understand the status of the current foster family pool

▸ Engage in child-specific recruitment

▸ Engage foster parents as recruiters

▸ Engage the faith community

▸ ## Clearly understand the characteristics of children in an agency's care

Agencies must, first and foremost, develop a clear picture of the location, demographics, and needs of children and youth for whom the agency is recruiting foster parents. The demographics of the foster care population is not static, and therefore requires frequent analysis of the data to understand where children in foster care are living, the ages and gender of children entering care, and their unique needs.   Agencies that rely on the same recruitment plan year after year are likely not engaging potential caregivers in a way that reflects the changing nature of their foster care populations.

Geo-mapping is one strategy that can help agencies better understand where children who are removed from their families live and the communities where they should concentrate their recruitment efforts.   By understanding where children in custody are from, agencies can better target recruitment and partner engagement in specific communities. Many colleges, universities, and other public systems have geo-mapping capabilities and are willing to partner with child welfare agencies to help them learn more about their foster care population.

Agencies also need to understand the unique characteristics of children in care. This includes basic demographics (ages, sibling groups, gender), and the needs of special populations, such as children with disabilities, medically complex children, those with prenatal substance exposure, LGBTQ youth, etc. Understanding the characteristics of the foster care population and how it changes over time can inform the difficult and time- sensitive process of matching children with the foster parent who can best meet their needs and keep sibling groups together.

▸ ## Conduct a foster family utilization review to understand the status of the current foster family pool

Many agencies begin implementing recruitment plans without an accurate picture of their current pool of foster parents. Agencies can conduct a foster family utilization review to understand which foster families are still actively accepting children into their homes and their current capacity. In many cases, families haven't had a child placed in their home in years because they aren't fostering anymore and haven't had their name removed from the foster parent inventory. In other cases, caseworkers simply won't place children in their homes anymore because the home is not appropriate. Regular utilization reviews ensure that agencies have an accurate picture of their current foster parent pool and better target their recruitment efforts. They also help agencies assess why families are no longer accepting children to inform their training, assessment, and support strategies.
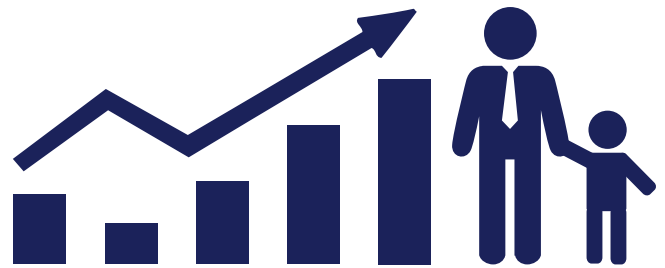
It is also critical to track the preferences of foster parents and how they match up with the needs of children and youth. Agencies with a shortage of foster families are often pressed to place children in homes that don't reflect their stated preferences, which can set children and their foster parents up for failure. Agencies can use the assessment, training, and home study process to help families clearly articulate the types of children they feel confident supporting and document these choices in the matching process.

▸ Engage in child-specific recruitment

Child-specific recruitment involves intensive efforts to engage prospective foster and adoptive parents to meet the unique needs of a specific child in foster care. Child-specific recruitment has been primarily implemented for an agency's longest-staying children, for children with complex medical or behavioral needs, or for special circumstances that do not match the competencies of the existing foster parent pool.

Child-specific recruitment is possible even for children new to foster care. Entry into foster care is not always a child's first engagement with the child welfare system. He or she may already be involved in community-based or in-home, preventive services that have assessed children's needs and the types of support required. These assessments and other documentation can inform the recruitment and placement matching process for children once they enter foster care.

➤ **Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) |** A signature initiative of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, WWK employs 260 recruiters for children and youth awaiting adoption. Research has found that children are 3 times more likely to be adopted if they are connected to a WWK recruiter.

➤ **The National Resource Center on Diligent Recruitment |** The Center lists several strategies for Child-Specific Recruitment here.

➤ **You Gotta Believe (YGB) |** YGB works in NYC and Long Island to recruit foster and permanent families for older youth in foster care by building trust with the youth, identifying people in the child's personal circle, and then supporting the relationship-building that leads to a physical placement. YGB also provides MAPP training tailored for foster and adoptive parents of adolescents. A critical success factor for this specialized training is sessions with young people who have experienced foster care and with other veteran foster or adoptive parents. Learn more here.

▸ Engage foster parents as recruiters

Child welfare agencies consistently report that satisfied foster parents are an agency's best recruiters. Some agencies hire seasoned foster parents to help plan and implement recruitment plans and engage prospective foster parents in dialogues about what it means to partner with the child welfare agency.

➤ **Incentives for foster parents |** Leaders at Children's Community Programs of Connecticut, a private foster care agency, reward existing foster parents with $1,500 for each new foster family they recruit who makes it through the licensing process and commits to at least one year of service. New foster families also receive a reward once they are licensed. Administrative staff, community partners and state leaders also have a role in communicating the rewards and benefits of being a foster parent. For more information contact Brian Lynch, CEO of CCP-CT.

▸ Engage the faith community

Building off the success of One Church–One Child, which engages the faith community to find families ready to adopt children from foster care, several agencies have engaged faith-based leaders to identify families that have interest in becoming foster parents. One example is the Christian Alliance for Orphans, which has implemented an African-American Initiative that focuses on recruiting from churches in predominantly African-American communities. Their "Stand Sunday" annual event galvanizes churches nationwide to educate their congregations on the need for foster families. The organization has developed foster parent recruitment resources for churches at varying levels of commitment. View their resources here.

BEST PRACTICE #3

Develop a Customer Service Mentality with Prospective Foster Parents

Customer service means that agencies make foster parents feel respected and appreciated from the moment they first inquire about foster parenting through orientation, home study, training, and placement. Quality customer service involves taking care of the customer's needs by providing professional, helpful, and hands-on assistance before, during, and after first contact with the customer. Providing great customer service to foster parents requires responsiveness, timeliness, and attentiveness to their needs at every step in the process and requires friendly, supportive interactions.

Foster parents are the primary intervention for children in foster care, and their stability and satisfaction have a direct impact on the well-being of the children in their care. Even small, but meaningful responses to foster parents' requests make a big difference in their satisfaction and continued commitment. It also increases the likelihood that they will recommend foster parenting to their peers.

Strategies to ensure high quality customer service for foster parents include:

▸ Make a good first impression by responding quickly to initial inquiries
▸ Make orientation an engaging event
▸ Follow up with a visit or call to prospective foster parents
▸ Create an easy to understand home study and training process
▸ Make thoughtful matches between foster parents and children
▸ Listen to the voices of foster parents
▸ Create a foster parent support position or unit
▸ Celebrate foster parents

▶ **Make a good first impression by responding quickly to initial inquiries**

Most potential foster parents develop strong first impressions about the type of treatment they can expect to receive from an agency from the moment they contact them to learn more. These initial judgments often shape their attitudes and impact decisions about whether to attend an orientation session to further explore what it means to be a foster parent. The agency's first opportunity to demonstrate responsiveness is to address initial inquiries as quickly as possible, preferably within 24 hours. Some agencies go as far as developing a "secret shopper" process to hold staff accountable for timely responses to inquiries.

▶ **Make orientation an engaging event**

Orientation is the first opportunity to provide foster parents with a realistic picture of the rewards and challenges of foster parenting. Prospective foster parents should know what the role entails, the expectations of the agency, and the challenges of parenting children who have experienced trauma. They should be aware of the support they will receive along the way from the agency, other foster parents, and the broader community. Agencies can create a balanced view that neither sugarcoats the experience nor scares prospective foster parents away. The goal of orientation should be to "hook" foster parents into wanting to learn more about the process and engaging in a mutual assessment with the agency of whether foster parenting is right for them.

▶ **Follow up with a visit or call to prospective foster parents .**

Soon after orientation, agency staff or seasoned foster parents should follow up with the prospective foster parent to learn more about them and capture their interest. A post-orientation visit also provides an ideal opportunity to get a sense of the home environment and to re-introduce the steps in the licensing process in a less stressful environment than a formal home visit.

▶ **Create an easy to understand home study and training process**

The requirements for becoming a licensed foster parent can feel onerous and overwhelming. Having a clearly articulated set of steps for foster parents to complete is critical, as is helping them navigate these steps with as much support as possible.

▶ **Make thoughtful matches between foster parents and children**

Agencies must take a careful approach to matching children with foster parents who can meet their needs. While matching is often considered an art and not a science, agencies can adopt innovative technologies to support this process.

The ECAP (Every Child a Priority) system developed in Kansas is a web-based tool that supports decisions about the most appropriate matches for a child and includes profiles of foster home qualities and preferences. The information in this database helps placement staff find the best foster home for a child based on his or her needs. Research has found that children placed using ECAP experience fewer moves and spend less time in the system than other children.

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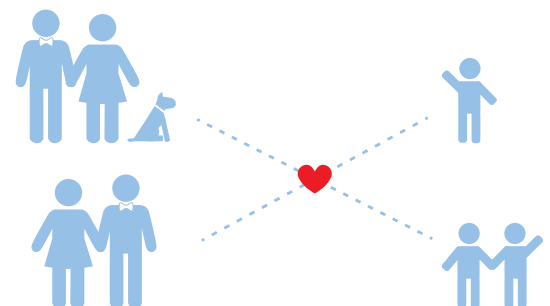
▶ **Listen to the voices of foster parents**

A customer services mentality means that agencies listen to questions and concerns from foster families, address their concerns without judgment, and make them an integral part of the team so they can advocate on behalf of the child. As the adults who spend more time with the child than anyone else on the team, their input in child and family assessments, case plans, team meetings, court hearings, and other processes is key to ensuring the child's needs are met.

▶ **Create a foster parent support position or unit**

Foster parents need support specialists who are solely dedicated to helping them work through their caregiving challenges and celebrate their successes. While the structure of these positions varies across jurisdictions, key components of successful foster care units include smaller caseloads to allow for individual and regular monthly home visits, 24/7 availability, an "on call" system to respond to urgent requests for help with children, and frequent interaction with other members of the child's support team. Agencies also need separate staff to help foster parents through licensing and recertification.

▶ **Celebrate foster parents**

Foster parents sometimes feel overlooked or ignored by the agency. When parents feel valued, it greatly increases their morale and willingness to partner with the agency on behalf of the child in their care. Agencies can acknowledge foster parent contributions by sending anniversary cards that commemorate their years of service, holding annual dinners or celebrations to honor foster parents, creating a Foster Parent of the Year award to honor the great work of foster parents, and more.

Streamline the Licensing Process
For Kin & Foster Parents

The licensing process creates an opportunity for child welfare agencies to assess foster parents for their capacity to provide safe and nurturing care, prepare them for their caregiving roles, and educate foster parents about the rewards and challenges ahead. Unfortunately, many foster parents are quickly overwhelmed with the long waits, intrusive protocols, and large volume of paperwork, and drop out of the process before becoming licensed. The longer and more complex the licensing process, the increased likelihood that parents will lose momentum and drop out. A clear and streamlined licensing process can help to ensure that foster parents follow through on their commitments.

By necessity, this process looks different for kin than for non-kin foster parents. Given that kin step in for children with little preparation, agencies should have one clear process to approve kin in an expedited manner and another for full licensure.

The process for full licensure for kin should be the same as that for non-kin foster parents, but might include the following kin-specific accommodations:

▸ Create a policy and process for expedited approval of kinship caregivers

In the past, child welfare agencies would wait until a kin family was fully licensed before placing a child in their home. The practice of expediting approval of kinship caregivers pending the full licensing process is increasingly common and can help agencies ensure more first time placements with kin.

Strategies to support expedited approval include:

» **Policies for expedited walk through, criminal and CPS background check and kin family assessment |** Children should be placed with kin first, but not without careful assessment of the caregivers' homes and standard approval protocols. Policies should detail the procedures that must take place before a child is placed, such as a visit to the home of a caregiver and criminal and child abuse and neglect background checks. The expedited process requires a strong team within the agency to complete these necessary safety checks. Many agencies find that teaming among staff from different units – ongoing services, child protection, and foster care – can ensure that all these steps are completed in a timely way and that child protection staff have the support needed. It also helps to get multiple perspectives about whether the placement is likely to be beneficial for the child.

» **Staffing structure to support kin |** The agency's infrastructure should align with a kin-first philosophy, which includes dedicated staff – sometimes called kinship navigators – who are knowledgeable about kinship families and can provide support in the immediate weeks following the placement. This includes helping caregivers set realistic expectations for the child's return home to the birth parent, identifying concrete needs such as food, clothing, and beds, helping families access services for the child, and educating kin families about the licensing, court procedures, and other agency processes. Some agencies have kinship support units for this function, while others contract with private providers to ensure support for kin families.

» **Family teaming |** A family team meeting that occurs before or soon after a child's removal provides an opportunity for the family and the agency to discuss the next steps for the child. The DC Child and Family Services Agency conducts a family team meeting within 72 hours of a child's removal which includes the child and extended family, the CPS worker, the child's foster care worker, management staff, community-based providers, and any other members of the child's team. At the meeting, a family genogram is created and the team discusses risks to the family, their worries, strengths and next steps. Find out more about the different forms of family team meetings here.

» **Live Scan technology for fingerprinting |** Live Scan refers to both the technique and technology to capture fingerprints electronically without the need for the more traditional method of ink and paper. The Live Scan process can be mobile and completed at the home or office of the kinship caregiver and/or prospective foster parent, further facilitating emergency placement of a child. Learn more about Live Scan here.

▸ Develop a kin-friendly licensing process

» **Grant non-safety waivers for kin |** Kin face multiple barriers to becoming licensed due to licensing standards that don't recognize the pre-existing relationship between children and their kin. The Fostering Connections Act reinforced existing federal law that allows child welfare agencies to waive non-safety standards, such as room size, number of children in a room, and training requirements, for kinship families on a case-by-case basis. Many agencies have developed clearly articulated policies and procedures for waiving non-safety standards and have developed a "license in" philosophy for kin. The State of Connecticut developed Placement Waiver Request Form to document the types of waivers requested and to clarify the level of staff approval needed to grant the waiver. The District of Columbia's Foster Home Licensing Policy includes a "list of potentially waivable items" that provides clear guidance to caseworkers about the types of things that can be considered for waiver requests.

» **Adopt model national standards for foster parent licensing |** State foster parent licensing requirements across the country have become so overly burdensome that they are difficult for many foster parents to meet. This is especially true for kinship foster parents, who are often precluded from becoming licensed foster parents because of outdated and discriminatory standards that are not necessarily geared toward safety of the child. The Model National Standards for Foster Parent Licensing outline a common sense, contemporary and flexible set of foster parent licensing standards with safety as the primary consideration. States can compare their own rules to the model standards to determine where they can update and streamline their standards.

» **Provide emergency kits for foster parents |** A Second Chance, Inc. in Allegheny County, PA provides its kinship foster parents with emergency kits that contain several of the items needed to pass a home inspection. Many of the items are donated by local businesses and include smoke detectors, batteries, emergency phone number stickers, batteries, and a first aid kit. The kit not only gives caregivers a head start with some of the safety items they need to pass a home study, but also demonstrates that the agency values their foster parents.

» **Conduct lean process mapping to identify barriers to licensing |** Denver County, Colorado uses lean process mapping to identify and implement strategies to reduce barriers to timely licensing completion. The agency discovered that 80 percent of the process did not feel valuable to the families or the agency and was subsequently able to shorten the licensing process by 62 percent.

» **Create a staff position to support families through licensing |** The Human Services Department in Santa Cruz created a new position, the Family Resource Liaison, to provide one-on-one support for foster parents during and after the licensing process. Liaisons provide individualized assessments of caregiver needs and linkages to services. The new positions resulted in a notable increase in foster parent satisfaction.

Use Trauma-informed Pre-service and Skills Training Curricula

The trauma that children in foster care have experienced as a result of being raised in chaotic environments, as well as the trauma of removal, requires in-depth understanding and compassion from caregivers. Most placement disruptions are caused by the lack of understanding, support, and skill that caregivers need to address difficult, trauma-related behaviors. To address these issues, best practice jurisdictions integrate an understanding of trauma into the preparation and ongoing training foster parents receive so they feel better equipped to address the needs of children and youth and know where to go for support when they feel overwhelmed.

The most effective training programs include sessions with young people who have experienced foster care and veteran foster parents who can share real-life examples of the joys and challenges of fostering.

Effective training programs also adapt to the participants' needs and provide accommodations such as child care, meals, and reimbursement for gas and mileage. (See the description of fosterparentcollege.com below for a highly flexible, online platform.) For kin caregivers, some jurisdictions provide one-on-one trainings when group trainings are not possible.

▸ Provide high quality pre-service training for kin

Recognizing that kin do not have the luxury of making an informed decision about being a foster parent because they already have the child in their home, many jurisdictions are moving in the direction of a separate, streamlined, and more flexible training designed to address the unique circumstances of kin families. These kin trainings are typically conducted in a support group environment that combines skills development along with an opportunity for families to address the challenges they are facing with the children in their care. Some jurisdictions also provide an in-home training option for caregivers that can't make the in person training sessions.

Examples of kinship specific training curricula include:

» **Caring for Our Own |** Model Approaches to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP). Caring for Our Own is an adaptation of MAPP and uses a support group format for kinship caregiver training. In nine weekly 3-hour meetings, the caregivers develop ongoing support networks, build skills to better parent the children in their homes, and learn to manage their relationship with birth parents and the public agency. The Center for Development of Human Services also offers an online version of Caring For Our Own to caregivers in NY State. Learn more here.

» **Traditions of Caring and Collaborating Models of Practice |** The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) developed the Traditions of Caring practice model specifically for kinship caregivers. The model includes a 27-hour training to assess caregivers' ability and resources to protect and nurture children, meet developmental needs, and support relationships with birth parents and other family members. CWLA provides training and consultation to agencies that wish to implement the model. Learn more here.

» **Other Kinship Training Models |** In some jurisdictions, private providers have developed and implemented their own training models for kin families who are caring for children in foster care.

  ▸ A Second Chance in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, has developed Standards for Assessing and Recognizing Kinship Strengths (SARKS), a curriculum designed specifically for kin caregivers becoming licensed foster parents. It includes 8 sessions that incorporate trauma-informed practice and can be done in-home. Learn more here.

  ▸ The Bair Foundation has also adapted training that supports its evidenced based therapeutic foster care program, Together Facing the Challenge, by integrating many of the concepts taught by Dr. Joseph Crumbley, a national expert and trainer on kinship care.

All foster and adoptive parents can benefit from the following pre-service training models:

» **Trauma Informed Partnerships for Safety |** Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (TIPS MAPP). TIPS MAPP is a trauma-informed 30-hour training for foster and adoptive parents. Trainers work with prospective parents, individually and in group sessions, to educate them about the child welfare system and the role of foster parents, provide the necessary skills to be a successful foster/adoptive parent, and determine if they are a good fit for their agency. Learn more here.

» **PRIDE |** The Child Welfare League of America and FosterParentCollege.com have developed the New Generation Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) Model of Practice for agencies and families. The model is strengths-based, implements culturally-responsive best practices, and teaches trauma-informed skills for staff and parents. The training is organized into five in-person group sessions and twelve online training modules. Learn more here.

▸ ## Ongoing training focused on skills for both kin and non-kin foster parents

Pre-service training provides the foundational information that foster parents need to partner with the child welfare agency on behalf of children and families. On-going training and development is where the rubber meets the road – when families have children placed in their home and they are dealing with the day-to-day challenges of meeting their needs. On-going training helps build foster parent skills to help children heal and to respond appropriately to the lingering effects of trauma.

Training that helps prevent disruptions is particularly important and may include:

» **Keeping Foster Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP) |** KEEP is an evidence-based program for kin and non-kin foster parents, designed for children aged 5 to 12 and teens. Groups of seven to ten foster parents attend 16 weekly 90-minute sessions that focus on practical, research-based parenting techniques. Trainers tailor each session to the specific needs, circumstances, and priorities of the parents and their children. Learn more here.

» **Trauma Systems Therapy |** Developed by Dr. Glenn Saxe and Dr. Heidi Ellis at Boston University School of Medicine and NYU Langone Medical Center, TST is an evidence-based therapeutic model that teaches families, agencies, and other systems how trauma impacts children's development and how to appropriately respond. TST relies on multidisciplinary teams and community systems for treatment planning and identifying and effectively addressing children's traumatic stress. TST has been adapted for kin and non-kin foster parents and will be available for free on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's website in the summer of 2017. An evaluation of the model found that TST was effective at increasing child well-being and placement stability. Learn more here.

» **National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) |** The Training and Implementation Program at the NCTSN provides free access to online trainings for parents, caregivers, youth and professionals. The NCTSN Learning Center website has trainings in the areas of assessment, treatment and services, training, research and evaluation, and organizational and systems change for traumatized children, adolescents, and their families. Learn more here.

» **Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competency (ARC) treatment framework |** ARC was developed by the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute for children and youth who have experienced complex trauma. It has 10 core components within 4 domains: attachment, self-regulation, competency, and trauma experience integration. The framework breaks down the core concepts into key skills and targets. Training and consultation is available for agencies interested in integrating ARC into their practice. Training options range from a two-day workshop to a year-long comprehensive training program. Learn more here.

» **Connect |** Connect is a 10-week program, recently adapted for foster parents of children between the ages of 8-19, to educate them on attachment, trauma, adolescent development and parenting challenges. During each 90-minute session, parents meet in small groups with two trained group leaders. Parents watch role-plays and perform exercises to learn better ways to manage and react to difficult behaviors. Learn more here.

» **FosterParentCollege.Com |** FosterParentCollege.com produces research-based interactive online courses for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents. Nationally recognized experts design the courses, and training topics range from parenting strategies to addressing behavioral challenges. Each course is two hours and includes a 30-40 minute visual presentation using vignettes, interviews and instruction. Printed materials and topic-specific discussion boards are also included with trainings. The site has an online management system, which allows agencies to assign specific courses for parents, with easy access to training records. Learn more here.

Provide Ongoing Support to Help Foster Parents Meet the Needs of Children in Their Care

In addition to training, foster parents need hands on support and material assistance to meet the needs of their children. Foster parents who quit in the first two years of services overwhelmingly report that lack of support was the single biggest reason they decided not to continue fostering. An infrastructure of support is built on the agency's acknowledgement that every child in foster care is unique, and that foster parents need to know they can rely on a community of support to help children heal and thrive.
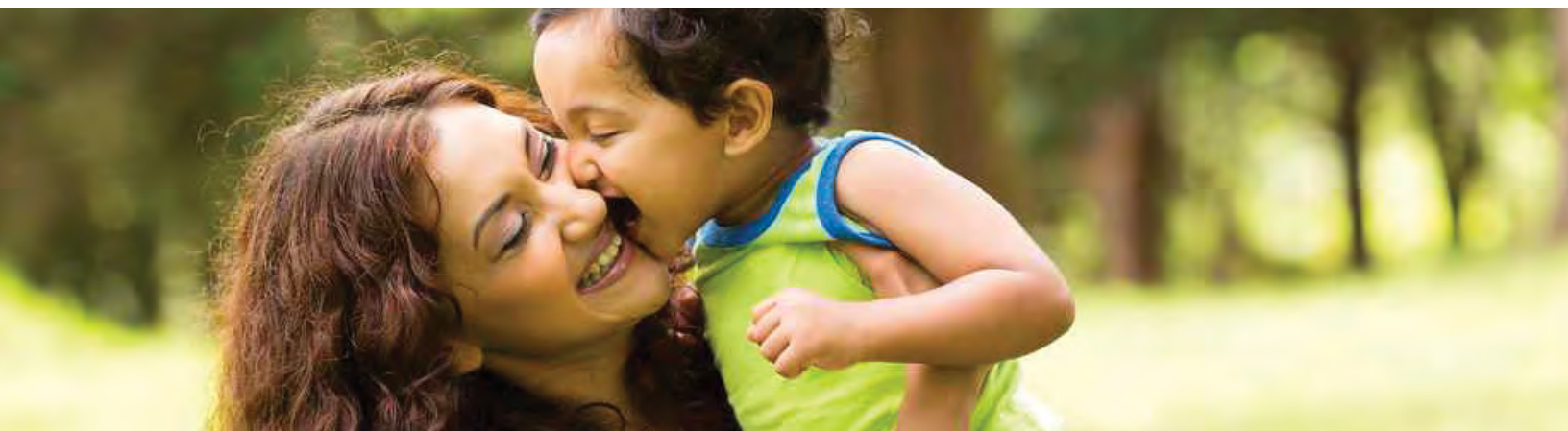
Strategies for supporting foster parents include:

▸ Provide access to crisis intervention

▸ Provide multiple opportunities for peer support and exchange

▸ Help foster parents meet the needs of special populations

▸ Offer respite care

▸ Make treatment foster care, including kinship treatment foster care, a robust part of the foster care continuum

▸ Ensure adequate financial support

▸ Help foster parents partner with birth parents

▸ Provide access to crisis intervention

   When foster parents experience a crisis in responding to the special needs of the children in their care, they need real-time help from qualified individuals to prevent disruptions. The New Jersey Department of Children and Families operates a Mobile Response and Crisis Stabilization service that's available 24/7 to help defuse an immediate crisis and keep children in their current living situation.

▸ **Provide multiple opportunities for peer support and exchange**

New foster parents report that other experienced foster parents are often their best sources of information because they have "walked the walk" and can relate to their struggles. Several agencies employ or provide stipends to seasoned foster parents to mentor new foster parents, organize peer support groups, provide respite, and participate in training.

▸ **Help foster parents meet the needs of special populations**

Many child welfare agencies create special supportive networks for specific populations of children and youth, such as LGBTQ youth, large sibling groups, victims of domestic sex trafficking, children who have experienced sex abuse, etc. These networks share common questions and concerns about the children and youth in their homes and can advocate with one voice for their needs. One example of this is Family Builders in Oakland, CA, a program designed to recruit and support foster parents caring for LGBTQ youth.

▸ **Offer respite care**

All parents need a break from the physically and emotionally demanding challenges of caregiving. This is especially true for foster parents and kinship caregivers caring for children with special needs. Many communities don't have respite programs, but research confirms it can help reduce stress and prevent disruptions. Respite can also be done through a barter system that is arranged between foster parents, which requires minimal funding. For publications on different types of respite, how to create a respite care program, and lessons learned from implementation of respite programs, see Taking a Break: Creating Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Respite Care in Your Community and Creating and Sustaining Effective Respite Services: Lessons from the Field.

▸ **Make treatment foster care, including kinship treatment foster care, a robust part of the foster care continuum**

Treatment foster care (TFC) is an intervention that equips foster parents who are caring for children and youth with serious social, emotional, medical or behavioral issues with specialized training and support to manage their issues in the home. Placement into TFC is based on an assessment of the child's needs and treatment foster parents are typically provided with 24/7 crisis intervention, respite, and other specialized services. Most states use a combination of Medicaid, Title IV-E and state dollars for TFC, and several public and private agencies are removing barriers to supporting kin caregivers to be treatment foster parents.

▸ **Ensure adequate financial support**

Foster parent stipends are often insufficient to meet the material needs of children in foster care. In the past, campaigns to raise foster parent stipends have noted that rates for boarding a dog are often higher than room and board for children in foster care. Several states have raised foster parent rates in recent years to better reflect the true costs of raising a child, especially children with serious health and mental health challenges. Foster parent stipends for kin foster parents should also be equal to the foster parent subsidies for non-kin.

▸ **Help foster parents partner with birth parents**

One of the most important skills that foster parents need is to work effectively with birth parents.   Agencies have to clearly convey the expectation that foster parents work in partnership with birth parents to help them regain custody of their children. This means supporting visitation between children and parents, asking parents about their children's likes and dislikes, and modeling positive parenting techniques. The Ice Breaker is a family team meeting designed to introduce parents and caregivers and help them establish a relationship on behalf of the child.

BEST PRACTICE #7

Create Community Networks to Support Foster Parents

There is no doubt that foster parents benefit greatly from knowing that they have the authentic support of the community to fulfill their caregiving roles. Several agencies have created organized community networks to step in and help with a range of needs –providing foster parents with financial and resource needs, creating opportuni-ties to pray together, sitting with children in need of placement, sprucing up visitation rooms and other spaces, supporting their advocacy efforts, and more.   While not the primary purpose, in some cases these efforts have also increased the number of volunteers willing to become a foster parent.

Examples of community networks include:

» **Embrace Oregon |** This Initiative connects caring community members with vulnerable children and families in the metro Portland area in partnership with the Department of Human Services. The Initiative provides several different avenues for community involvement, including providing for material needs, volunteering, mentoring, babysitting, and fostering. Information is available here.

» **Oklahoma 111 |** This faith-based effort offers families with options to support children and families in care through mentoring, making meals, supporting children reunifying with their parents, and more. More information is available here.

» **CarePortal |** Also a faith-based initiative, CarePortal engages churches in Kansas, Missouri and elsewhere to support children and families in foster care. More information can be found here.

» **The Village |** This organization was created by a group of five foster parents who wanted to create a strong infrastructure of peer support for foster parents in Rhode Island. For more information, see their Facebook page here.

» **Fostering Futures NY (FFNY) |** FFNY is a nonprofit program in New York's Capital Region that recruits and trains teams of volunteers from the community to provide natural and practical support to foster families. Find more information here.

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BEST PRACTICE #8

Special initiatives for System Improvements

Innovative initiatives to create stronger partnerships between child welfare agencies and foster parents are occurring across the country and have the potential for more widespread replication. The initiatives described below began locally and are now spreading to other jurisdictions with the support of the sponsoring organizations.   While not the only approaches, they demonstrate that with the right leadership, commitment, partnerships, and infrastructure, foster families truly can succeed in helping children heal and thrive.

Examples include:

» **Quality Parenting Initiative |** Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is a systems-change approach to developing partnerships between foster parents and agencies to make the culture, policy and practice changes necessary to focus child welfare systems on excellent foster parenting. QPI helps agencies and foster parents articulate what each expects of the other and build consensus on what makes for quality caregiving. QPI provides practical, web-based tools and resources to build foster parent knowledge and skills. QPI also focuses on equipping foster parents with more in-depth knowledge about child development to help children thrive and meet key developmental milestones. QPI is being implemented statewide in California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana and Nevada and in several local jurisdictions, including Milwaukee, Cleveland, Fort Worth and Philadelphia.

» **Mockingbird Family Model |** Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) is an integrated approach to foster care service delivery that creates micro-communities (called Constellations) that provide a community-based network of supervision and support for caregivers and children and adolescents who have come to the attention of the child welfare system. MFM promotes placement stability, prioritizes sibling connections, leads to active child protection and increases permanency. Foster parent retention improves as this system helps support caregivers.

» **A Second Chance |** A Second Chance is a comprehensive kinship recruitment and support model that provides kinship case management and support services to the entire kinship triad of the child, caregiver and birth-parent. This model has lead to high kinship placement and permanency outcomes in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania through a variety of programs including Point of Contact, Kinship Cares Curriculum, Standards for Assessing and Recognizing Kinship Strengths (SARKS), Kinship Emergency Response and Kinship Navigation.

» **Alia |** Alia provides consultation and support services to public and private child welfare leaders, using demonstration projects, leadership coaching and training to improve permanency outcomes, workforce wellbeing, and systemic redesigns. Alia specializes in organizational and cultural transformations to create environments where youth and their caregivers can thrive. Alia coaches agencies and staff in using proven methods of supporting youth in families using trauma healing, exhaustive search methodologies and programs that recruit and support excellent caregivers.