

# Chapter I

## The Fundamentals

### 1. Resource Families: Partners, Not Employees

A common assumption people make is that resource families—in particular foster parents—are *employees* of the agency that supervises them. This is understandable, since on the face of things foster parents might seem to fit the definition of an employee: someone hired to perform a job in exchange for financial compensation. After all, once they undergo the interviews and scrutiny of the licensing process and have children placed in their homes, foster parents receive a check each month. And, like other DSS employees, foster parents are bound by the same expectations of protecting clients' confidential information.

***Resource families make a remarkable commitment when they decide to partner with child welfare agencies.***

But this idea of foster parents as agency employees does not hold up. The money they receive each month is not wages but a partial reimbursement that enables them to meet the needs of the children in their homes. This is underscored by the fact that as a rule state and federal governments do not consider monthly foster care reimbursements as taxable income (NFPA, 2007). A few other characteristics that make foster parents different from other agency employees include:

- They do not get the same pay increases received by agency employees
- They do not get benefits received by agency employees (e.g., health insurance, paid time off and sick days, worker's compensation, unemployment benefits, pension, use of agency car, etc.)
- They are always on the job, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Resource families are not agency employees, nor are they temporary workers.

But if they aren't employees, what are they? The answer, of course, is *partners*: people who join with others to pursue a common interest or goal. In their case—and ours—that common goal is the welfare of children and their families. If we explain things well enough in marketing materials, orientations, and pre-service training, foster parents and other resource families enter into partnership with our agencies voluntarily and fully-informed about the various roles they will play, which include one or more of the following:

1. Caring for and nurturing children in foster care until they can be reunited with their parents
2. Working as reunification partners with birth families (i.e., engaging in shared parenting and maintaining connections)
3. Serving as members of the team: working closely with county departments of social services to ensure child safety, well-being, and permanence
4. Becoming an alternative permanent family for the child, if reunification isn't possible (i.e., engaging in concurrent planning)

When you add all this up—the hours, the pay and benefits (or lack thereof), the multiple and complex roles they play—it is clear that resource families make a remarkable commitment when they decide to join in partnership with child welfare agencies.

To support resource families and fulfill their side of the partnership, child welfare agencies should:

- Ensure that all staff members understand the connection between the overall success of the agency and the agency's ability to attract, train, and support qualified resource families
- Apply North Carolina's family-centered principles of partnership when interacting with resource families:
  - Everyone desires respect
  - Everyone needs to be heard
  - Everyone has strengths
  - Judgments can wait
  - Partners share power
  - Partnership is a process
- Apply North Carolina's System of Care principles when interacting with resource families:
  - Individualized, strengths-based care
  - Cultural competency
  - Family and youth involvement
  - Accountability
  - Community-based services
  - Interagency collaboration

To be sure, doing this takes some effort, but it pays off.

## **GOLDEN NUGGET!**

### **Starting Out on the Same Page**

Another Choice for Black Children, a private child-placing agency based in Charlotte, NC, makes an effort to ensure its staff and current and prospective resource families



are on the same page—literally! Another Choice has developed a two-sided handout: one side describes what the agency expects of families, while the other describes what families can expect of agency staff in return.

The handout is used during staff orientations, in parent orientation and trainings, and on an ongoing basis to ensure that each party remembers and lives up to its commitments.

Agencies may adopt these handouts (see Appendix A and B) for their own use.

## **2. Characteristics of a Successful Program**

Like every person and every family, each agency's program to recruit, retain, and partner with resource families is unique. That said, it is also true that some of the most successful programs share one or more of the traits in the table below. Each row in the table describes a trait and lists the page where you can learn more about it.

## Common Traits of Successful Resource Family R & R Programs

Program Characteristic	To Learn More Go To Page(s)
Everyone in the agency sees it as his or her job to contribute to the recruitment and retention of resource families.	5, 6, 67
The agency uses current resource families as much as possible in their recruitment and retention efforts.	72
The agency uses culturally-sensitive recruitment strategies to meet the needs of all children.	26
The agency uses data to regularly plan and evaluate recruitment and retention efforts.	10-14 (Chapter II)
The agency uses the media to enhance the agency's profile in the community.	31-42 (Chapter VI)
The agency partners with other agencies to collaborate across county lines to optimize outcomes.	43-44, 48-49, 78
The agency uses targeted recruitment efforts (e.g., to find homes for teens, African American children, American Indian children, etc.) to meet the specific needs and reflect the characteristics of children in care.	51-56 (Chapter IX)

### Key Definitions

For key definitions of basic terms and concepts related to recruiting, retaining, and partnering with resource families, refer to Appendix C.

### State and National Resources

You don't have to reinvent the wheel. In Appendix D you will find a list of recommended resources from across North Carolina and the nation that provide useful templates, short cuts, and suggestions.

## 3. Importance of Agency Leadership

In a child welfare agency, finding and supporting families for children in foster care is *everyone's* job. Yet some people have more important roles to play than others.

Agency leadership—especially the agency director—sets the tone for the entire agency. When it comes to recruiting and retaining resource families, the impact of the director's attitude can be profound.

What the director does and does not say and do sends a message to staff at all levels. If the director sees resource family recruitment and retention as central to the agency's success and communicates this belief through word and deed, most people come to see things the same way.

Here are some examples of concrete steps agency leaders can take to strengthen recruitment and retention:

## Relating to Resource Families

- **Get to know the resource families** who care for the children in your custody. Be sure that you understand what foster, adoptive, and kinship families do, and make it clear to them that you understand the importance of their role.
- **Be friendly to resource families.** Model positive, respectful interactions with resource families when you see them in the building, at meetings, or in public.
- **Be available to speak with families upon request.** Front line workers should be responsible for most exchanges with resource families, and for building the trust that is necessary for a successful working relationship with them. However, it can be reassuring to both workers and resource families to know that directors are always available if outside brainstorming is needed or to help problem solve a specific situation. At the same time, avoid over involvement—if a director is too involved, a direct worker can be disempowered.
- **Give out your contact information.** Any time you have contact with a foster, adoptive, or kinship family, give them your contact information so they can reach you directly for help if necessary.
- **Consider resource families in all you do,** from writing policy to writing a memo. Include the foster, adoptive, and kinship family perspective in all materials you produce, all speeches you give, all meetings you have with those you supervise, and any time you interact with the community.

## Relating to Your Staff

- **Send a clear and consistent message about recruiting, retaining, and partnering with resource families** at every employee's orientation, regardless of the person's role. Encourage everyone in the agency to attend resource family pre-service training. Regularly report your agency's strengths and needs related to resource families using posters, your agency's newsletter, presentations during general staff meetings, etc.
- **Make your priorities clear.** Demonstrate that support of foster, adoptive, and kinship families is an agency priority by including it in the job descriptions and evaluations of all staff; make it a factor in determining promotions and raises.
- **Financially support your agency's recruitment and retention efforts.** Doing so makes sense, given the costs of having too few resource families. Financial support can take many forms, including offering recruitment incentives to current foster families and agency staff, funding respite and in-service training programs, providing longevity payments to foster families, paying for ads and promotional materials, or other creative measures. Budget to support resource family retention. Consistently set aside money for appreciation events, snacks during training, thank you cards and other little demonstrations that the agency values resource families.
- **Encourage communication** among various agency programs about resource family recruitment, retention, and partnership issues.

***Make it part of your agency's culture to treat resource families like gold.***

- **Look for patterns in problems.** If you repeatedly hear the same problem scenario reported as occurring to different families, its likely there is an agency- or system-wide problem.
- **Speak positively about resource families.** Give them the credit they deserve publicly. Always remind others that your agency could not function without them. Do not allow staff to speak negatively about resource families.
- **Support the development and full implementation your agency’s MEPA plan.**
- **Use your contacts** to help recruit and support families. If you have a friend or family member who can offer a reward to resource families (e.g., a discount at a store or restaurant, a free manicure, or a larger donation), use your personal influence to make it happen.
- **Insist that your staff treat resource families with dignity and respect.** Make it part of your agency’s culture to treat resource families like gold.

Adapted from Goodman, 2008

## 4. How Agency Staff Can Contribute

**Agency Social Workers** (EVERYONE, including but not limited to those working in the areas of adoption, child placement, and child protective services)

### *Key Strategies for Supporting Resource Families*

- **Return phone calls promptly!** Families need to have their calls returned in a timely fashion to provide excellent care to our children. Provide information resource families can use to contact alternative agency representatives (e.g., supervisors) in the event that you cannot be reached.
- **Give them information.** Provide full disclosure regarding the background and needs of the child. Keep resource families informed about the child’s situation and provide updated information about the child’s needs. Provide them with feedback.
- **Be flexible in making appointments with and for resource families.** Work with foster parents when planning home visits, meetings, or appointments for the child. Families have schedules, too!
- **Include foster parents in permanency planning for the child.** Foster parents should be included in discussions and meetings to share ideas about possible permanent families for the child. Invite them to court hearings, child and family team meetings, other meetings, and reviews.
- **Provide support and communication during CPS investigative assessments.** It may also be useful to cultivate a trained “allegation support” foster parent or other person to offer support to families, even if it is only listening. Providing resource parents with support and information during an investigative assessment can have a big impact on that family’s willingness to continue fostering if the report is unsubstantiated.
- **Be sensitive to foster parents when a child is leaving.** Even if foster parents have decided not to adopt, they still care about the child.

***Families must have their calls returned in a timely fashion to provide excellent care to our children.***

- **Gather information about the child from the foster parents.** Foster parents are the best informants about the day-to-day needs of the child. Ask them to give you information that can help identify the best family for the child and make the child’s transition smoother.
- **Help foster parents adopt if that is the plan.** Many children are adopted by their foster parents. They may need the help of the adoption worker in making that big decision.
- **Be responsive.** When there is a crisis or concern, be responsive. Return the call, go to the home, and find the service they need as soon as possible.
- **Follow up with interested families.** When a family expresses an interest in fostering or adopting, get back to them as soon as possible.
- **Promote stable placements.** Provide ongoing support, planned respite, and needed services to families to prevent a disruption or crisis from happening before it is too late!
- **Educate and support other agency staff.** Enhance the experience of resource families by contributing to efforts to ensure all agency staff are on the same page when it comes to resource families. Your contribution can be made in any number of ways—from short, formal training sessions with the people in your agency who answer the phones to informal exchanges in which you model and communicate the important role that resource families play and the respect they are due.

Adapted from Goodman, 2008

## **Administrative and Fiscal Staff**

### ***Key Strategies for Supporting Resource Families***

- **Process paperwork and payments efficiently and without delay.** Help social workers complete forms correctly on the front-end. It is crucial to retention and placement stability that children get needed services and resource families get needed reimbursements.
- **Look for patterns and problems with paperwork,** eligibility and funding issues—these impact the services children and families receive. Problem-solve and troubleshoot to keep the system running smoothly!
- **Participate in resource family appreciation events,** make a nomination for “Foster Parent of the Year,” help plan events.
- **Facilitate connections.** If you receive a phone call from a foster, adoptive, or kinship parent, transfer the call to someone who can help them immediately with their issue or need.
- **Pitch in.** Identify possible venues for recruitment efforts (e.g., churches, civic groups), participate in recruitment events, and distribute recruitment materials in your neighborhood.
- **Say “Thanks.”** If you see a foster parent in your building or in the community, thank them for what they do for our children.

***When resource families call, if at all possible, transfer them to a live person who can help them.***

Adapted from Goodman, 2008

## Agency Trainers

### **Key Strategies for Supporting Resource Families**

- **Spread the word.** Inform relevant agency staff and families themselves of any training that would benefit resource parents. Give timely notice and good directions so foster parents can plan ahead.
- **Choose training sites carefully.** Use convenient facilities with free parking.
- **Be family-friendly.** Work with others in your agency and community to arrange or provide child care so that families can attend training.
- **Feed them.** Buy good snacks so foster parents feel special!
- **Listen and respond.** Take seriously the evaluations resource families complete. Follow up on their suggestions and requests.
- **Be a good host.** Be courteous to foster parents in your building, help them find the restrooms, specific staff members, or meeting room.
- **Promote conference attendance.** Encourage foster parents to attend the annual North Carolina Foster and Adoptive Parent Association conference.
- **Make training fun.** Create a welcoming atmosphere in the training room. Meet and greet foster parents as they enter. Help them have an enjoyable experience!
- **Ensure training matters.** Advocate for and arrange trainings you hear foster parents request/suggest or you think would benefit foster parents. Make sure the training is practical and offers concrete suggestions they can use at home.
- **Promote partnership and understanding** by encouraging social workers (child placement, adoption, CPS) to attend trainings with foster parents.

Adapted from Goodman, 2008

Chapter XI of this guide provides more information about what directors, program managers, and many other folks inside and outside the agency can do to support recruitment and retention of resource families.

## **GOLDEN NUGGET!**

### **Improving Collaboration Within the Agency**

Enhancing relationships with foster parents is crucial to getting and keeping them. This cannot be left solely to licensing workers. Many other agency workers have contact with families, and these interactions have a large influence on the families' feelings about the agency (AdoptUsKids, n.d.). Improving collaboration and communication across the agency can be done in a number of ways, including the following:



- Holding facilitated dialogues with agency staff and foster parents, in order to clarify misconceptions and determine what works well in current practice and what doesn't
- Providing training to all agency staff about confidentiality, since misconceptions about what can and can't be told to foster parents is a major contributor to foster parent dissatisfaction
- Including child-placing staff and supervisors in any foster parent recognition efforts

Source: Casey Family Programs, 2005; Rodger, et al., 2006