

Chapter XII

Training as a Recruitment and Retention Strategy

There are two kinds of training typically provided to resource families: pre-service and in-service/ongoing. Each has a powerful impact not only on the recruitment and retention of resource families, but on these families' ability to meet the needs of children, which is ultimately what training for resource families is all about.

1. Pre-Service Training

In North Carolina, all prospective resource parents are required to receive 30 hours of pre-service training. The purpose of this first level of pre-service training is to ensure that each prospective resource family makes an informed decision about whether fostering and/or adopting is right for them.² To prepare them to make this decision, pre-service training teaches them about the needs of children in the child welfare system and the expectations child welfare agencies have of resource families, including the ability to engage in concurrent planning and shared parenting.

Training has a powerful impact on the recruitment and retention of resource families.

Over the course of the 30 hours of pre-service training, agencies have an opportunity to get to know prospective families so that they can:

- (a) Encourage those who seem well suited to and prepared for fostering and adopting
- (b) Identify those families who, with additional support and training may make excellent resource families, and
- (c) Identify those families who, though they may be able to help children in some other way, would not appropriate resource families.

For families in this latter category, agencies should praise family members for their desire to help children, discuss in a kind but candid way why the family is unsuited, and explore other ways that they might contribute to the lives of children in foster care (e.g., volunteering). For more on this, see the box on the next page.

Using information gained during the pre-service process, agencies can enhance retention by encouraging and supporting families who already are or who can become successful foster parents. At the same time, gently discouraging families who are unsuited can help reduced the likelihood of resource family turnover down the road.

Therapeutic Pre-Service

In addition to the 30-hour pre-service, therapeutic foster parents in North Carolina must receive 10 hours of specialized pre-service training. To learn more about this consult "A Supplemental Guide to Foster Home Licensing" on the Division's web site:

<http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/licensing/docs/Guide-09-26-07a.pdf>

² The 30-hour pre-service training is not designed to give families the skills they need to adequately care for children in foster care. It focuses wholly on helping families decide whether becoming a resource family is right for them.

GOLDEN NUGGET!

Talking with Prospective Resource Families: What to Say When the Fit's Not Right

The MAPP/GPS process is designed to help agencies and families come to a mutual agreement about whether fostering or adopting is right for them. Thankfully, most families realize it when the fit isn't right and elect to bow out of the process. When they don't, it is up to the agency representative to break the news to them. How should you break that news? Here are four strategies for doing the job with empathy and professionalism:



- **Tell the truth.** Put the situation into perspective for the family. Give as much information as you can about why your agency has made this decision.
- **Empathize.** Families will be frustrated or even angry. Let them vent. Negative emotions must be dealt with before they can be replaced with acceptance and a positive plan of action.
- **Suggest Next Steps.** Recommend a specific plan of action based on what you know about this family that will enable them to make a positive contribution to the welfare of children.
- **Follow up.** If the family expresses a desire to contribute to the welfare of children in some other way, follow up after a short period of time (e.g., one week) to thank them for their interest in children and the investment they made in exploring becoming a resource family. If appropriate, discuss again ways that they might help children by volunteering with your agency or another community organization.

Adapted from Berkley, 2002

2. In-Service Training

In North Carolina, licensed foster parents are required to receive 10 hours of in-service training each year. The purpose of this training is to ensure that foster parents have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to meet the needs of the specific children in their care.

In-service training can have a significant impact on resource family retention. One of the most common reasons foster parents give for quitting is the failure of the agency to provide adequate support (Gibson & Wildfire, 2007; NCFR, 1991; Rhodes et al., 2001), and providing quality in-service training on topics that can help them succeed is a very important form of support. Failure to train and support foster parents in a timely way can also have a negative impact on children in care.

Training needs of resource families should be identified and included in the out-of-home family services agreement. Child-specific training is important for the resource family to meet the needs of the child placed in their home.

This was confirmed during North Carolina's 2007 Child and Family Services Review. Federal reviewers concluded that foster care placements were disrupting due to behavior problems that caretakers were unable to address, and that agencies were making insufficient efforts to address the problems before the disruption (USDHHS, 2007).

GOLDEN NUGGET!

Advice about In-Service Training

Use of in-service training to teach foster parents how to be more skilled parents. Teach families about things they consistently ask about, including how to:



- Deal with defiant children
- Avoid power struggles
- Motivate children to use good social skills (e.g., follow instructions, accept consequences, ask permission, etc.)
- Make a plan to deal with any problem behavior
- Use consequences

3. Targeted In-Service Training Topics

As mentioned above, one of the primary goals of in-service training is to ensure that foster parents have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to meet the needs of the specific children in their care. Agencies can also use in-service training to develop current foster parents and prepare them to care for children who need foster placements. For example, if there are teens in your agency's custody who are placed in group homes because you do not have enough foster families who are willing to care for them, you may wish to offer in-service training topics that will familiarize foster parents with teens and give them a chance to practice the skills needed to parent teens. Having a panel made up of teens currently in care is another way that some agencies have helped foster parents overcome the "fear factor" and begin successfully parenting teens.

GOLDEN NUGGET!

Spread the Word about NC Reach

One concern that makes some families reluctant to adopt or foster teens is the question of paying for college. Be sure that your pre-service and in-service training events speak to this concern by sharing information about NC Reach, a truly sensational program that provides college funding and support services to young people adopted from North Carolina DSS foster care after the age of 12 or who have aged out of the system at 18. Thanks to NC Reach, these students will be able to graduate debt free from any North Carolina public community college or four-year school!



For further information visit www.ncreach.org or call 1-800-585-6112.

4. Developing a Strong In-Service Training Program

This section has been adapted from Caroline Crocoll's *Inspiring Volunteer Development: A Resource Book for Training Senior Volunteers in Intergenerational Programs* (2001).

To develop strong in-service training programs, child welfare agencies must understand what their current foster parents need to know to strengthen their ability to care for the children in their homes. To get this information, agencies should regularly assess foster parent training needs through one or more of the following methods:

- *Surveys*. Survey data can be used to establish baselines against which future comparisons can be made and to analyze trends across time.
- *Interviews* represent an effective method for collecting in-depth information about a topic or issue. They can also be used after a survey to explore specific results in more detail and greater depth.
- *Focus groups* are a good way to collect qualitative data from group discussions.

Additional information about foster parent training needs can be obtained from observations recorded on the Monthly Foster Care Contact Record (DSS-5295).

Once you have information about the training needs of your resource families, you are ready to design your in-service training program. Appendix T, "Training Design Worksheet," will help you with this process. Additional steps in this process include the following:

Identifying In-Service Training Ideas

- Decide what sources to use in generating ideas for in-service training programs (e.g., former and/or current resource families, policies and laws, etc.)
- Determine the best ways to identify these ideas for training (e.g., formal needs assessments, observations, interviews, conversations with colleagues, etc.)

Sorting and Prioritizing Training Ideas

- Determine which activities are the best ways to respond to the ideas generated
- Develop a process to prioritize training ideas for which in-service programs should be planned

Developing Training Objectives

- Write program objectives that reflect both what resource families will learn and the effects of that learning, as well as the operational aspects of the program
- Check to see that training objectives are written clearly so that they can be understood by all parties involved

Preparing for the Transfer of Learning

Transfer of Learning (TOL) is the application of skills and knowledge learned in one context being applied in another (Cormier & Hagman, 1987).

- Decide when the transfer-of-learning strategies should be employed
- Determine the key players who need to be part of the transfer-of-learning process (e.g., agency child welfare staff, instructors, resource families, etc.)
- Choose transfer strategies that will be the most useful in helping resource families apply what they have learned (developing individualized or group learning plans, providing mentors or peer coaches, self-help or support groups)

Determining Formats and Schedules

- Choose the most appropriate formats for the training activities (individual, small-group, large-group, or distance-learning)
- Devise a training schedule that best fits the format chosen and the resource families' needs

Preparing Budgets and Materials

- Develop clear learning objectives for each instructional session
- Select and sequence the content based on what the participants already know, the nature of the content itself, and instructor preference
- Choose training delivery methods that match the focus of the proposed learning outcomes that you are capable of using (lectures, case studies, skills-practice, story telling, games, etc.)

Formulating Evaluation Plans

- Specify the evaluation approaches that will be used
- Determine how the evaluation data will be collected (e.g., observations, questionnaires, etc.)
- Think through how the data will be analyzed, including how to integrate data collected through any informal evaluation processes
- Develop recommendations for current and/or future training directions

Source: Crocoll, 2001

Taking a Collaborative, Regional Approach to Training

Collaborating with other child-placing agencies in your region to provide training is a fiscally responsible, efficient way to make sure you are meeting the educational needs of resource families.

5. Training for Kinship Caregivers

To be licensed, kinship caregivers are required to receive the same training as non-relative applicants. Standards for licensing are also the same regardless of whether an applicant is related to a child. However, it is important to recognize that kinship care providers may face unique challenges in adapting to their role.

Often relative caregivers are assumed to know the child and birth parents well, and thus to require less training and support. The caregivers themselves, many of whom have already been a primary or secondary caregiver for the child, may also view the training requirement as an unnecessary burden (Cawthon, 2008). In addition, unlike non-related foster care applicants who may have researched agencies and the foster care system, kinship providers may have less knowledge about the child welfare system, and may have feelings of distrust or intimidation about working with the agency.


Further, kinship care providers often have to negotiate difficult changes in roles and boundaries within the family, such as denying visitation to a family member (Cawthon, 2008), reporting on a family member's progress or family conflicts at team meetings, and discussing permanency options for a relative's child whom they agreed to care for on a temporary basis. It is important that agencies recognize the special

It is important to recognize the special difficulties faced by kinship caregivers, as well as the valuable connections and support system they can offer the child.

difficulties faced by kinship caregivers, as well as respecting the value of the connections, loyalty, and support system they can offer the child. See Appendix U for a checklist to help develop training to meet the needs of kinship care providers.

GOLDEN NUGGET!

Foster Parents Comment on In-Service Training



- “Foster parents need to know how to better handle the grief process children go through both at removal from the home and then again when the child is to be adopted and they realize that, indeed, they are not ever going back home.”
- “At each age group we should know what’s available (e.g., services, recreation, community resources) for children. The more we keep them busy on positive things the less time they have for negative things.”
- “Foster parents need training that’s tailored to the children placed in our home. It needs to be give us the information and skills to care for a specific child.”
- “Find out what foster parents would like to have training in that is meaningful to help foster a child.”
- “Help arrange childcare or provide childcare during training and meetings.”
- “Provide an agenda or synopsis of training to help parents pick learning events that will benefit them. (For example, not all ‘cultural issues’ classes are the same.)”
- “Provide information on alternative training options, i.e., books, tapes, correspondence courses.”
- “Let foster parents know about trainings other agencies are doing.”
- “If a worker is knowledgeable, valuable training can take place at visits.”
- “Use knowledgeable families to train other families.”

6. Using Conferences for Training

Each year the NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (NCFAPA) holds a training institute for resource families. Encouraging your agency’s foster parents to attend these events demonstrates support for their learning and provides them with great opportunities to network and build their knowledge and skills. These conferences often inspire foster parents to recommit to the work they do with families and children. Some agencies perceive such value in this annual event and the “retention dividend” it can pay that they help to cover costs of foster parents’ travel and registration. To learn where and when the next NCFAPA conference will be held, go to <www.ncfapa.org>.

That said, agencies should understand that foster parent conferences alone are not enough. To ensure children receive the care they deserve and to provide the level of support that makes resource families want to stick around, agencies need to assess and

respond to families' training needs all year long. Foster parent conferences should never be more than a complement to an agency's resource family training program.

7. Using *Fostering Perspectives* for Training

Fostering Perspectives, a newsletter by and for North Carolina's foster and adoptive parents and child welfare professionals, can help resource families obtain in-service training. Foster parents who read an issue cover to cover and take the quiz on that issue can present their answers to their licensing professional for 30 minutes credit toward relicensure. To receive notification when new issues appear online, send a message with "Subscribe FP" in the subject line to johnmcmahon@mindspring.com. Read *Fostering Perspectives* online at <<http://www.fosteringperspectives.org>>.

8. Using Support Group Meetings for Training

Support groups provide a place to give and receive information, validation, advice, and emotional support, all of which can have a positive impact on resource family retention. In some agencies, time foster parents' spend participating in support groups is counted in their hours of training.

Please note that low attendance does not necessarily signify the failure of a support group. Low attendance can be due to many factors, including insufficient marketing efforts and the natural ebb and flow of group membership and parent needs. Agencies should be careful in judging the value of support groups based on attendance—even groups with low attendance can make an important contribution to placement stability, which can have a huge, positive impact on children.

The NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association can be a great resource for agencies that want to start or revitalize local resource family support groups. To learn more, e-mail the Association at office@ncfapa.org.