

Chapter XIII

Retention of Resource Families

1. Purpose

Keeping resource families in your program is an essential part of every agency's foster care and adoption efforts. Some natural attrition is to be expected due to adoption, moves, and other life changes, but you can never bring enough people in the front door if you are losing people out the back door due to dissatisfaction.


In fact, attempting to address recruitment without improving retention "may be potentially self-defeating for an agency....The satisfied, experienced foster parent is the foundation for any recruitment strategy" (USDHHS, 1995).

The entire agency must participate in order to retain a pool of engaged, well-trained, and well-supported resource families.

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Retention Facts and Figures

- As many as 60% of foster parents withdraw from the program within the first 12 months (National Commission on Foster Care, 1991).
- In a study of retention rates in 3 states by Gibbs (2005):
 - At least 1 in 5 foster homes leaves the system each year
 - Length of service: 8 to 14 months (vs. 5-8 years for earlier studies)
- Surveys of foster parents repeatedly find that the *primary reason* foster parents leave is a *lack of agency responsiveness, communication, and support* (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001).



2. The Foundation of Retention

A. Good case management - "TLC"

- Develop a **personal relationship** with resource parents and offer **ongoing support**, especially in times of crisis. Remember that just after a new placement and just before a change in placement are times when families need extra support.
- Be **responsive** to resource families. Encourage or implement a policy of returning calls within **24 hours**. Have workers give their supervisor's name and number on their outgoing voice mail, and update it to let callers know when they'll be out of the office.
- Develop a strong **respite care program**. Some agencies rely on families to let them know when or if they "need" respite, which limits consumers of respite to those who are burned out or are going out of town. Those agencies that

require respite once a month or every six weeks do much to promote retention and avoid crisis situations. Recruit resource families to serve as respite providers. This is a way to engage families in MAPP/GPS classes who may not feel ready to make a commitment to fostering a child full-time. It is also a way to give resource families experience before a child is placed with them on a more long term basis. Respite providers must also become licensed foster parents.

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A Respite Building Resource

The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids has developed *Taking a Break: Creating Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Respite in Your Community*. This manual is a comprehensive and practical guide, covering virtually everything needed to create and manage a respite program.



The first three sections outline step-by-step guidelines for designing and implementing respite services: exploring the benefits of respite, exploring respite options, and developing your respite program. The final section contains a large array of sample documents which may be freely adapted to meet the needs of local programs. The forms available include Respite Billing, Emergency Service Authorization, Parent Checklist, Event Evaluation, Respite Provider Agreement, and many more. Available online at <http://www.adoptuskids.org/images/resourceCenter/TakingABreak.pdf>

- Show your **appreciation** to resource families in whatever way you can: annual dinner, picnic, birthday cards, gift cards, holiday party, Christmas presents, social events, etc. Child placement workers, supervisors, and administrators should participate as well as licensing workers.

B. Quality training and professional development

- Have **foster parents co-trainer** for pre-service (MAPP/GPS). This not only improves the training for participants, but sends a clear message of partnership and respect. Agencies are strongly encouraged to pay foster parent co-trainers for providing this beneficial service.
- Provide an ongoing assessment of strengths and needs – a **resource family development plan**.
- Conduct annual **stay interviews** with foster parents, and **exit interviews** with those who leave. (See Appendix H and Appendix I for more information.)
- Provide support for a local **foster parent association**, and participation in state and national foster parent associations.
- Offer relevant, helpful trainings/meetings on a regular basis, or provide foster parents with other **resources for training**. Ask resource parents for their ideas

and involve them in planning and delivering events. Include child placement workers and other agency staff as much as possible.

- Establish with resource parents training and practice protocols for prevention and intervention in cases of **foster parent abuse allegations**.

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Five Things Your Agency Can Do To Support a Local Foster Parent Association

1. Help recruit speakers for association meetings and events
2. Provide funding for refreshments, child care, and/or mailings
3. Update members on important legislation or policy changes
4. Involve the association in agency decision-making whenever possible
5. Contact the North Carolina Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (www.ncfapa.org) for help in starting or growing a local association

Special thanks to Janice A. Spencer, MBA, Director, Stokes County DSS



C. Collaboration as partners in serving children

- Provide resource families with regular **supervision, monitoring, and consultation**.
- Include resource families in **decision-making**, including Child and Family Team meetings, Treatment Team Meetings, Court hearings, etc.
- Introduce resource parents to **other members** of the professional team serving the children in their care.
- Update them regularly on **court dates and decisions**.
- Provide foster parents access to their own **file**. State law [10A NCAC 70E .0902 (b) (10)] gives foster parents the right to review their record and receive copies of their foster care licensing record.

D. Collaboration as partners in the agency

- **Survey** resource parents annually on their needs and ideas.
- **Involve** resource parents in the development of agency policies, programs, and practices that affect foster care.
- Involve resource parents in **recruitment efforts**.
- Clarify the resource parent's role in service delivery with an up-to-date, **realistic job description**, including:
 - The goal of the foster care program
 - The specific responsibilities of foster parents in meeting that goal
 - The competencies and qualifications required
 - Guidelines for teamwork throughout a child's time in care
 - The rights of foster parents

3. Retention Efforts for Resource Families Before the First Placement

- Make sure they receive an agency newsletter to keep them feeling connected
- Invite and encourage them to provide respite care
- Connect them with other foster parents and your local foster parent association
- Resource families could help by:
 - Contributing to community awareness events
 - Helping with child care at MAPP/GPS classes or support groups
 - Volunteering at the office, helping to return phone calls
 - Attending and observing at Court
 - Connecting with the LINKS program to see what kind of adult support they can provide
 - Soliciting business partnerships and sponsors within the community

4. Retention Efforts for New Resource Families

- Provide mentors: partner new resource families with experienced ones. This helps new caregivers learn the ropes faster and with less frustration, recognizes the mentors for their longevity and wisdom, and builds a natural support network for families and children.
- Make use of North Carolina's post-adoption support resources to retain adoptive families.

5. Common Mistakes

The single most common mistake agencies make with regard to retention is considering only one person responsible for it, without recognizing the role that others in the agency must play. Others common retention mistakes include:

- Assuming that experienced parents don't need you any more
- Not fully disclosing information
- Not treating resource families like gold

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Benefits of Improving Resource Family Retention

- Reduces cost of recruitment
- Reduces time consuming activities related to recruiting and pre-service training
- Improves quality care for children
- Reduces placement moves and disruptions
- Fewer moves means less trauma for children

Source: AECF, 2002

