

Chapter V

Engaging Families from the First Contact

1. When Families Initiate Contact

Many people think about fostering *for a year or more* and hear messages about foster care *three or four times* before making an initial inquiry call (Pasztor & Wynne 1995).

When people finally reach out to make that first call, your response needs to be warm, timely, and encouraging (AdoptUsKids, n.d.). From the beginning, each potential foster or adoptive family should be considered a precious resource, deserving personal attention and efficient service.

Remember, we need them much more than they need us.

2. Where Families Get Lost

Often potential resource families drop out of the licensing process because it drags on for too long, or because they feel forgotten or unsupported. One study found that out of 2,698 inquiries from prospective foster families, only 8% (n=227) resulted in new licensed/approved foster homes for the child welfare system (Wildfire, 2008).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation suggests that agencies can get more people successfully through to placement by making the process more efficient. They found that typically a lot of time is wasted between licensing steps:

Between	And
The First Call	Orientation
Training	Application
Assessment	Approval
Orientation	Pre-service Training
Application	Assessment
Approval	Placement

Consider the following questions to enhance your response to potential resource families:

- When do gaps occur between the first call and placement of a child in a foster home?
- Which steps take the most time?
- Where do you lose the most people?
- What are you doing or can you start doing to keep people engaged?
- What are you doing or can you do to speed up the process?

Source: AECF, 2002

3. Common Mistakes

Waiting Too Long

Some agencies wait until families complete all or part of MAPP/GPS training before meeting with them individually, starting the application process, submitting background checks, or doing a home visit. While this strategy may seem to help you focus your time on families who are “serious” about fostering, it may instead mean that people who could be serious become frustrated with the long wait and give up. The sooner people can make a personal connection with someone at your agency, the more likely they are to commit to the process. If instead they have to wait through a drawn out process before being personally engaged, they are more likely to quit before they really get started.

Being Too Hasty

Some agencies are too quick to screen individuals out of consideration if they do not meet certain requirements. Although some shortcomings cannot be remedied (e.g., a serious criminal history), others can. For example, someone may be perfectly willing to get her GED if it means being able to care for children who need it.

4. Winning Strategies

The Personal Touch

It’s crucial to have standards for quick, personal responses to new callers. People who make a personal connection to an agency are much more likely to stay the course. At least one large public agency in North Carolina adopted a policy of **visiting families within one week** of that first phone call from a prospective resource family. While workers at first thought this would be too time consuming, it became part of a very successful recruitment and retention approach.

At a minimum, interested callers should receive a **follow-up phone call** within a few days to answer additional questions and be sure they received their information packet and orientation session date.

Another worker made a point of **personally calling** all interested families **before the orientation** session to give them her name again and let them know she would be at the welcome table at the orientation. Especially for single parents, having a person to look for—and who is looking out for them—can make all the difference.

GOLDEN NUGGET!

Partnering with Your Resource Families to Make that Personal Connection



Don’t have enough staff to do home visits to all new callers? This can be a great role for experienced resource families. Or you can ask new callers if they would like a phone call from a current resource family to answer more of their questions.

Worried about what your current resource families might say? Think again. It’s better for families to know the real story from the beginning, and to know your agency’s going to be straight with them.

Tracking What Works

Collect information to help you assess which recruitment efforts are most effective. Be sure you ask “what made you decide to call today?” or “how did you hear about us?” every time someone new calls. See Appendix E for a sample intake form for new callers and Appendix F for a sample spreadsheet to track responses.

Other Ideas from AdoptUsKids for Engaging New Callers

- Have a special recruitment 800 number and a real person answering the phone; have access to a translator for return call.
- Prepare the person who answers the phone to answer most questions. Don’t bounce the caller around from person to person.
- Make sure your orientation of prospective parents makes them feel welcomed, respected, accepted, and needed.
- Teach all who come into contact with resource parents how to handle the first call. In training, emphasize the best way to respond to cultural differences.
- Provide persons who have first contact and/or take first calls with talking points rather than a script and with answers to commonly asked question. See a sample of talking points in Appendix L.
- Provide new callers with information on the children who need homes:
 - Age and various racial ethnic backgrounds
 - Emotional needs of children
- Provide new callers with information on the pre-service training process.
- Send notes and meeting reminders at least a week before the first orientation or training session.
- Put the parents on a mailing list for newsletters.
- Periodically audit the agency’s first contact approach:
 - Use a “secret shopper” method in which agency staff call in to personally experience the quality of response.
 - Auditors: use a checklist to rate the experience and give consistent feedback.
 - Ask: Do we encourage callers to bring friends to orientation?

Source: AdoptUsKids, n.d..

5. Screening Families “In” vs. “Screening Out”

Everyone who recruits and licenses resource families must answer a fundamental question. When you begin a mutual assessment, is your underlying belief that you need to screen **out** inappropriate families, uncovering secrets or misconceptions that might make you reluctant to place a child in their home? Or is your underlying belief that you need to screen **in** families who show potential and interest by determining what support, training, or resources they would need to successfully care for a child?

Our underlying attitudes and unspoken priorities have a big influence on how we do our job and relate to people.

Of course our first priority is to find safe, stable placements for children in care. But no family or home is perfect. How do you decide which risks you can live with and which you can’t? How do you decide which families you can develop and train, and which are not worth the effort?

Our underlying attitudes have a big influence on how we do our job and relate to people.

Many families in North Carolina have been denied placements by one agency only to go on to successfully foster or adopt children from other agencies or even other states. Agencies who successfully place children—especially those considered “hard to place”—work collaboratively and creatively in partnership with families to address their needs and build on their strengths.

We talk about being strengths-based all the time. Sometimes the reality is that we don’t look very hard for strengths, and we are quick to rule out families based on superficial needs.

6. Keeping Our Own Preferences in Check

For many of us, the ideal family looks a lot like our own. Of course, this kind of bias—often unconscious and unintentional—occurs in all professions and types of people. We tend to feel most comfortable with people who are most like us (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Phelps, et al., 2000). However, when making life-altering decisions about finding homes for children, this kind of bias needs to be brought into the light and challenged.

In North Carolina, some families who wish to foster or adopt may be so different from the social worker that it is hard to see their strengths. A family with limited formal education may seem lacking to a social worker from a middle class, college-educated background. A non-traditional family may seem inappropriate to a worker from a very traditional family. But are these really the characteristics that make for good families?

The relative wealth of a family can also be a big influence. True, we need resource families who can support themselves without an over-reliance on the small reimbursement provided for taking care of children from the child welfare system. Yet often there is a values-based decision about what is needed for a child to live happily with a family.

It’s not that finances or beliefs shouldn’t play a part in the mutual home assessment; it’s just that we need to recognize our own biases about money, social class, and lifestyle. A family may not be just right for you personally, but they may be just right for a child in need of a home.

GOLDEN NUGGET!

Examining Our Assumptions about Money and Motivation

Some child welfare professionals are “put off” when one of the first questions a prospective resource family asks has to do with financial compensation. Although social workers may feel concerned—families’ primary reason for wanting to foster should not be money (or they will be sorely disappointed!)—this is a good example of a time when it is important to keep one’s biases in check. Given that many people deliberate a long time before calling the agency, it is possible that they may have answered many of their other questions (e.g., is their house large enough, how long is pre-service training, etc.). It may be that financial questions are among the few they have not yet answered.

The point? Even if someone’s first question is about money, don’t assume they are just “in it for the money.” Remember the principle of partnership that says, “Judgments can wait.”

