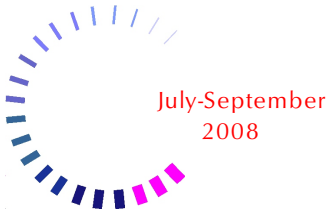


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The Foster Family Which Thrives

How can agencies retain experienced foster families and avoid burning them out? There are no simple answers and each situation will be different, but perhaps the recognition that foster families are unpaid professionals with specific talents and skills would be a good place to start. The following ten suggestions are offered as guidelines to employ when working with foster families. They take into consideration both professionalism and volunteer aspects of the foster family role.

Certify Only Those Families Who Really Want to Do the Work

In a time of a shortage of foster families, it may be hard to pass up any application. However, it is best to remember that only those people who really want to do the work will be satisfied by it. The work includes working not only with the children, but their families, the agency and other professionals as well. It means contributing to and following through on service plans. It means being knowledgeable about the committed to permanency for children, in short, being a good and effective team member.



Certifying families committed to these tasks will minimize the potential for dissatisfaction and mutual frustration sometimes experienced by foster families and agency personnel.

Give Praise and Recognition

For foster families, praise and recognition must extend beyond an annual recognition dinner. People engaged in any profession expect to be treated as professionals. Foster families are not clients, but professional colleagues with agency employees. Are they treated as such by the agency?

For example, are they given all information available on a child and family and are they expected to use this information in a professional manner? Praise for a job well done is important, but recognition of the status that comes with the role is equally important.

Teach the Celebration of Accomplishment

Foster families have high expectations for themselves and their foster children. These expectations may be unrealistic and when they are not attained, the foster family can experience frustration and anger. The outcome of this need not be the lowering of expectations, but the learning to celebrate each accomplishment. Long trips are taken in small steps.



Invest Your Resources in Training

The opportunity to learn and study is welcomed by strong, active professionals. Good training programs sell themselves because they meet

foster families needs and interests.

Support services are important. Key management and supervisory personnel need to support training efforts with the agency's personnel and other resources, as well as their own personal involvement.

Build in Growth, Development and Advancement Opportunities

Foster families can do much more to provide services for children and their families than simply to meet the day to day health and safety needs of children. They can grow into effective team members, team leaders, and child welfare advocates.

Foster families who have had good professional experiences with their agencies can become excellent advocates for all social welfare components of an agency and indeed should be encouraged to do so.

Encourage Experienced Foster Families to Share Their Knowledge and Skills with Others

Experienced foster families can conduct Orientation Meetings, Certification Programs and, in general, provide those less experienced with a wealth of assistance. Agencies should also cross-fertilize ideas by encouraging experienced foster families to share specific areas of expertise between agencies through formal Training Programs. Mentoring within agencies is also an excellent process.



Insist That Foster Families Participate in the Decision-Making Process

Service Plan Reviews are most successful when key parties participate fully. Foster families are important service providers and as such, must be expected to take part.

This is the only effective manner in which foster families can carry out their functions.

Give Foster Families Autonomy and the Resources Needed to Act

Foster families should not be expected to carry out specific human service tasks without the autonomy awarded and service provider. Good training programs can afford them the skills needed to work with other professionals on behalf of children and families. Timely reimbursement for services provided is essential. Foster families should not have to wait weeks for reimbursement or board checks.

Do Not Overburden Foster Families

Remember that foster families are volunteers who share their lives 24 hours a day with people from outside their own families. This means that, in reality, they have absolutely no privacy unless respite care and similar services are provided by their agencies. Since they are essentially people who want to give to others, they can easily over extend themselves and must be given the opportunity to retreat and recoup.



Be a Good Role Model

You, as agency workers, can set a tone for interpersonal relationships on the service team. Employees of the agency, as well as the volunteer professionals, must reflect the values of the agency. How values and skills are modeled will affect the attainment of the permanency goal for children in care.

These ten guidelines do not exhaust the possibilities for sustaining, nourishing and retaining foster families, but they do indicate a good starting point.

As agencies build foster care teams, the growth opportunities available to each team member will become more critical in maintaining good services. Perhaps serious consideration of these guidelines will point out specific areas within each agency on which pathways to higher quality programs can be found.

