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The Agency Role in Building and Supporting Foster Parent - Birth Parent Collaboration **By Heather L. Craig-Oldsen, MSW** **Director of Program Development, Child Welfare Institute**

Child welfare agencies will trust foster parents to care for children quite autonomously 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, yet not trust them with information critical to the therapeutic care of the child.

Today most child welfare agencies talk about teamwork, partnership and collaboration. Too frequently, though, collaboration moves no further than the talk stage. This is probably more an artifact of organizational structure and policy than lack of skills or desire. For example, interpretation of confidentiality policy and/or law can unduly limit a foster parent's access to information about the families of the children in their care and in some cases to peer support. Foster parents caring for children who have been sexually abused should know specifics about who the abuser was, the time of day the abuse occurred, where it occurred and under what circumstances. This helps foster parents manage "trigger" situations with the child and support the birth family's efforts to heal in practical ways.

In order to assure that organizational structure does not get in the way of collaborations between foster parents and birth families, child welfare managers need to ask two important questions: 1) What policies, practices and structure discourage collaboration in my agency? 2) What policies, practices and structure encourage collaboration?

A recent survey of foster parents and agency staff revealed the following factors as contributing to poor collaboration:

- Lack of clarity regarding the foster parent's collaborative role in building positive alliances with the parents of children in their care. Anecdotal evidence reveals numerous cases of foster parents being told that they do not need to participate in foster care review meetings, or, worse, that they are not allowed to participate in foster care reviews.
- Agency staff, foster parent guides, and training programs should repeatedly clarify the important role of foster parents in building positive alliances with the parents of children in their care.
- Separate training. Separate training of CPS workers, foster care staff, adoption staff, foster parents and adoptive parents can serve to discourage collaboration. Joint training is not meant to suggest that everyone is trained to do everything. Rather, joint training would illustrate how the different parts of the system can work together to develop alliances with families to protect their children.
- Confusion about due process and available administrative support. Some foster parents do not understand due process and the administrative support available for foster parents. This lack of understanding often contributes to fear that children will be removed if staff disagree with the way foster parents express needs, confront issues, etc.

With the reduced time frames associated with ASFA, building an organizational structure that supports early collaboration between foster parents and birth parents is essential to ensuring timely permanence, as well as the well-being of children. These strategies will help encourage collaborations between foster parents and birth parents.

- Every agency should have a clear statement of rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders, as in the Tennessee Bill of Rights for Foster Parents, which was promulgated into law last year. (See www.state.tn.us)
- A foster parent trained in policy and procedures, and established as a volunteer with the administrative agency, can effectively serve as a liaison for other foster parents in times of fear, lack of communication and violation of policy. Tennessee has established this volunteer position successfully. Additionally a foster parent advocate or ombudsman position in the state office has been effective in Tennessee.
- Staff and foster parents should be encouraged to voice differing opinions without fear of reprisal. Foster parents who suspect reprisal must have access to a fair hearing and knowledge of due process.
- Team or unit management of a case from opening to closing is an innovative strategy and structure for building collaboration. Where team or unit management is-not possible, develop clear practice guidelines about communication and transferring information that involves the family, current worker or resource family and the transitional/newly-assigned worker and/or resource family.

- A staff person assigned to work with every foster/adoptive parent association can contribute to collaboration generally.
- Although difficult in these fiscally tight times, funding for collaborative activities for foster parents, parents and staff- such as social functions and meals - contributes to collaboration. One agency in Sioux City, Iowa, has set aside money for foster parents and birth parents to go out for a meal together, to build a collaborative relationship without the pressures of the agency setting. Sioux City also funded joint support groups for foster parents and parents of children in foster care.
- If collaboration is an expected practice, then clear role and practice expectations about collaboration must be stated by every supervisor to every staff person. Also, each supervisor must develop a system for monitoring ways the collaboration expectations are being met, or not being met. Finally, every supervisor should develop and use a feedback system for workers and resource parents relative to collaboration practice.
- Joint training of CPS staff, foster care staff, adoption staff and foster/ adoptive parents should be standard. It is more likely that various staff members will be trained together than it is that foster parents will be trained collaboratively with staff. Some specific and unique training sessions are obviously designed for specific functions. However, any training that relates to collaborative work with children and families should be attended by foster parents as well as staff. If birth parents can be involved as resources for the training, they should.
- Finally, it is important to develop a clear mission statement focusing on collaboratively helping families make effective decisions regarding safety, well being and timely permanence. A clear statement of roles and responsibilities of resource families and staff in accomplishing goals through collaboration will emerge from a clear mission statement. Using the mission statement, as well as the role and responsibility statements will serve as a focus for determining accomplishments and success at every staff meeting or training in any agency supported meeting.

Not so many years ago I spoke at a foster parent conference in a mid-western state. It was; in fact, the first foster parent conference ever held in that state, in part due to an interpretation of confidentiality policy. Up until that time some decision-makers interpreted the confidentiality policy to mean that foster parents' names could not be published in any way. Consequently, foster parents could not organize and meet together. Foster parents throughout the state were not allowed to have any contact with parents of children in their care. As I spoke with one foster parent after another I discovered that many of those foster parents were risking their licenses by secretly meeting with the parents of the children in their care. Those foster parents knew that collaboration with parents is good - good for the foster parents and good for the child in foster care.

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