

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

## Children in Need of Protection: Working With the Foster Care System

by Barb Fabre

Foster: 1) to bring up; nurture. 2) to promote the growth and development of; cultivate; detect and foster artistic talent. 3) to nurse; cherish. 4) providing parental care and nurturing to children not related through legal or blood ties.

*It's 2:30 — early Tuesday morning. The telephone rings and Donna Jenson, a licensed social worker with Walter County's Human Services, answers the phone. It's Officer Jackson at the Sheriff's office. He informs Donna that he has two young children who have been removed from their home as a result of a domestic call. The children's mother and her boyfriend are in police custody. In the background, Donna can hear the children — Isabella, 2, and Joshua, 4 — crying. Their 22-year-old single mother has had numerous run-ins with the law and social services. Over the past five years she has moved from county to county and been on and off welfare while struggling with drug and alcohol issues. The mother, herself, was in the foster care system between the ages of eight and 16 years, until she ran away. She has been on her own ever since. She has no contact with her immediate family.*

*Donna must find an emergency foster home for Isabella and Joshua until she can either locate a relative who is willing and able to care for the children or make a more permanent foster care placement. Donna tries to console the children by assuring them that they will be taken care of and that their mother is going to get help and they will see her again. However, Donna recognizes that it is likely that the children will be out of their mother's care for a long time. At 4:00 a.m., Donna brings the children to a licensed crisis care home (where children can stay for up to seven days until a placement home is found). The children are emotionally and physically exhausted.*



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*Donna immediately starts the paperwork for placement of the children. She has placed seven children already this month and continues to manage 52 other cases. A social worker's job can be overwhelming, difficult, frustrating, and never ending. Luckily, Donna finds a foster home willing to take both children.*

*Jim and Sharon Richards are a caring couple who have been licensed foster care providers for three years and have cared for five children. Jim and Sharon are both employed and have no children of their own. Isabella and Joshua arrive at the Richards' home with the emotional trauma of recent events and the one set of extra clothing given to them in crisis care. As they cling to the stuffed animals the officer gave them, they are clearly cautious and nervous about being with these strangers.*

*Donna gives Jim and Sharon as much information about the children as she can. She lets the Richards know they can receive a clothing voucher for the children from the county and that she will start the paperwork for foster care payments. Donna then receives another call for child protection and has to leave.*

*Jim and Sharon can recognize the fear in the children's eyes. The children appear to be small for their age. They wonder if the children are allergic to any foods. Are they afraid of the dark? What about their immunizations? They try to comfort the children with words and by offering food and toys. The Richards must help the children to cope with their feelings of separation and loneliness while facing the great responsibility of meeting the children's immediate developmental needs. But, with little history or knowledge about the children's development, this will be a big challenge.*

*This story is fictitious, yet for those who work in child welfare, this is a typical case. In my experience as a foster care worker and then foster parent, I saw many children make their way through the foster care system. Although the names and faces change, the stream of cases like this one is continuous, and each case is as disturbing as the next. Some-*

times, as a result of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or death in a family, courts decide that children must be temporarily separated from their families. These children come from all cultural and economic groups; although in many communities, children of color are over-represented in the foster care system. A child's stay in foster care may be as short as overnight or as long as it takes to achieve a permanent plan for the child. The first goal most often considered is to reunite the family if possible.

## The foster care system

According to a recent report, there are approximately 532,000 children in foster care throughout the United States (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2001). More than 50% of these children are under the age of 10 years:

- 5% are under the age of 1 year
- 22% are between the ages of 1 and 5 years
- 24% are between ages 6 and 10 years

As we know, the early years are significant in laying the foundation for later learning and for the developing brain and a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Social workers notoriously have large caseloads of children in family crises. Most cases are complex and many are tragic. The paperwork, court process, and the ongoing investigations are endless. Most of the child protection units at social services agencies in the United States are overworked and understaffed. They daily face the effects of poverty, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, lack of parenting skills, and child neglect and abuse and the tragic effects of these on children.

There are many types of out-of-home placements:

- relative (kinship) foster care
- foster care (non-relative)
- group homes
- institutions
- pre-adoptive homes

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the placement of children with older family members — in many instances grandparents — whose own children have grown and moved out of the home. However, this time around, grandparents are faced with the challenge of raising



PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA LARSON

children who have special needs and for whom there is little support.

The monthly cost of out-of-home care can range from \$400-1,000 per child, depending on the child's difficulty-of-care (DOC) points. There are also the related expenses which include clothing vouchers, transportation, staff time, court costs, counseling, and medical expenses.

When children are placed in non-relative foster care, they are brought to the family's home with few, if any, personal possessions. Social workers typically have little information to share with foster parents regarding the child's history, especially during the first few weeks of placement. This makes a difficult situation even worse. Foster parents and the children are expected to forge a relationship with each other with little information in less than ideal circumstances.

## The role of the foster parent

Foster parents are responsible for providing quality care and meeting the needs of the child(ren) placed in their care — meeting the needs of the *whole child*. They must be prepared to care for children of all ages, backgrounds, and needs. For this reason, it is vital that foster parents be properly trained in child development, child abuse and neglect, and behavior management. They must receive continued support and communication from social service workers, including information about the child's health history and education. Providing a continuum of services for each child helps to bring stability and normalcy to his or her life during these

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## The Role of Early Childhood Programs: Nurturing the Child

Judy Harrison, Lexington, Kentucky

### The teacher's role

One of the most important gifts the teacher can give a child is to listen. Children are likely to share their feelings with a teacher they trust. Guard that trust so children can count on you to hear what they need to say. Conversations, except those revealing child abuse or neglect, should be kept confidential. Children know if you can be trusted by the way you listen to them and respect what they have to say.

Refuse to allow negative comments about the child's living arrangements to be made inside your classroom. When confronted with negative comments about the child's life, keep quiet or change the subject. You can establish this rule by scheduling a meeting with everyone involved to explain your position, or you can prepare a handout for all parents when their children enter your classroom. Many of these suggestions would also apply to children whose parents are separated or in divorce proceedings, especially those involving custody battles.

### Focus on the child

- The key to managing this situation well is to focus on the children 100% of the time.
- When talking with the children, focus on them, not on their living situations.
- When the children talk to you about their birth parents, foster parents, or social worker, tell them how important they are to all of these people. Children need to know that it is okay to be loved by many people.
- Never engage the child in conversations to satisfy your own curiosity. If you want to know what is going on, ask an adult. Children need to be children.
- Never discuss with co-workers, social workers, or parents the particulars of the social services case in the child's presence. Discussions regarding his living situation should be conducted in an office.

- Insist that everyone maintain confidentiality about the child and his living arrangements.
- Don't take sides with anyone involved in the foster care arrangements of the child. The child's well-being should be your only concern.

### Child care as a safe refuge

- Celebrate something positive about each child everyday. Foster children often suffer from low self-esteem resulting from their abuse and neglect histories and their involvement with multiple agencies dedicated to protecting them. Protecting children is an adult activity that children cannot understand.
- A child's smile and enjoyment of the child care program should be celebrated.
- Take photographs.
- Write positive notes to children letting them know that you believe in them.
- Make duplicates of photos, notes, children's work to share with birth families and foster families.

### The importance of documentation

Encourage all persons involved with the child to share information with you that will help you better understand the child's feelings and behaviors. Explain that you will be documenting the information in the child's folder. When someone begins to talk with you about the child, pick up pen and paper and begin writing. This practice of accurate, timely documentation minimizes miscommunication and discourages long-winded conversations. When the conversation is complete, show the person what you have written and if they agree, date and sign the comments. Your documentation should include the name of the person providing the information, date and time, and objective facts. Your documentation should be kept confidential in keeping with the policies of your center. If someone wants to share information "off the record," reiterate your policy and refuse to participate in the conversation.

To read the entire article "When One Family Is Not Enough: The Lives of Young Children in Foster Care" please visit our web site: [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) — go to "Free Resources"

times of transition.

## The need for foster parent training

Foster parents need education and training that will support their work as caregivers in providing the best possible care for children who have experienced trauma related to living in unhealthy emotional and physical environments. The range of training topics could include:

- child development
- emotional behaviors
- brain development and the effects of trauma on the developing brain
- attachment disorders
- effects of methamphetamines and other drugs on children
- autism

Foster parent training is offered through social service agencies during the initial recruitment and training process, through early childhood programs, school districts, chemical dependency programs, and mental health agencies. Foster parents who are trained in early childhood education are better prepared to care for young children because they have information about the child's development needs and understand the way foster care placement and separation from families of origin impact children.

## The care and education of foster children

When a child experiences trauma, learning is disrupted. Behavior issues arise and depression is common in even the youngest victims. Most parents whose children are in foster care experience many of the same emotions as their children: denial, anger, guilt, and remorse. Here are some steps we can take to make a positive difference in a child's life:

- empower biological parents to prioritize their children's needs
- encourage parents to get involved in their children's education
- build parents' empathy for their children and what they are going through
- build their understanding of child development
- teach effective parenting skills
- help parents recognize their role as their children's first teacher

It is critical to the reunification process that parents get the

help they need to be effective in their role as parents.

Ironically, many parents whose children are placed in foster care were in foster care themselves as children. Interrupting the cycle of abuse and neglect involves commitment from many different people and a prioritization of the needs of young children.

## Cultural sensitivity

Best practice in early childhood education is based on a deep respect and appreciation for the cultures and beliefs of the children and families in our care. Culture is one way that we build connections with one another. It is especially important in times of stress and separation from family members that we stay connected to our cultural roots and gain comfort in the traditions and values with which we were raised. When children are removed from their home under suspicion of child abuse or neglect, their lives are in a state of upheaval. Efforts to return stability to their lives are critical:

- be sensitive to cultural differences
- let children take the lead in teaching us about their traditions and beliefs
- listen to children and invite them to share themselves with us
- communicate our respect for them and their experiences
- open the door to the development of a trusting relationship

## The role of early childhood educators

The well being of the child is of primary concern to everyone involved in foster care. However, lack of communication between biological and foster parents, social workers, early childhood staff, medical professionals, and others, as well as issues of confidentiality and limitations on service delivery serve to disconnect those whose role it is to help these children.

At the heart of early childhood education is the value placed on relationships. In developing relationships with children and families and the professionals responsible for their well being, early childhood professionals play a vital role in connecting the pieces of the foster care puzzle and keeping the children in the forefront of everyone's minds.

## Promising practices

One group of early childhood professionals on the White

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### Responding to the needs of foster families

Many times foster families feel as though they are not regarded as a “real” part of the child’s life. They have total responsibility for the physical and emotional care of the child, but none of the legal or birth rights. There are strategies that can be used to help foster families feel more comfortable in your center or classroom.

First, review the application process to be certain that it is sensitive to the needs of all types of families. Ask each family — birth and foster — and social worker to fill out the forms. You will gain valuable insight into the child’s life as well as the family dynamics surrounding the child in foster care. All parties care for the child in different ways and from different vantage points.

Second, when planning holidays, parent days, and other family events, remember that the foster child has two families and both need to be included. During the admission process, ask families how they want you to address this issue. A schedule of who will come to each function may need to be established or both families may be comfortable coming together. Each situation is different. Be sure each family knows they will be treated as equals in your classroom. The key to this strategy is planning.

Third, when making gifts for families, doing family trees, collecting pictures of families, remember to encourage the child to bring pictures from both families, make two of the same gifts, and do two family trees. This is an excellent way to teach everyone in the classroom that all families are unique and special.

Fourth, ask the foster family if there is documentation they will need to meet the requirements of the social services agency. In most states, foster families must maintain a “Life Book” and daily documentation of the child’s activities. This not only makes the foster family feel as though you value them as professional caregivers, but gives the child a history of the time he spends with you in the classroom.

Finally, ask the foster parent how they want you to introduce them to other members of the staff. Constantly hearing, “This is Denise’s foster mother” is unpleasant. For this moment in time this individual is performing all of the duties of parenting the child. Ask them how the child addresses them. Does he/she call them mom/dad or does the child call them by their first names? This will give the child the sense that you, the teacher, understand the differences between families. Most of my foster children and their parents refer to me as Momma Judy. The children’s teachers also addressed me as Momma Judy. There is a clear distinction between the birth mother and the foster mother.

Foster families present unique challenges to early childhood programs. Learning what you can about these families, as well as other types represented in your program, communicates your respect for and appreciation for all of the forms that families take. Encouraging families to discuss their needs with you and to tell you about their living arrangements and the problems and opportunities these present can build a strong bridge between home and school that serves the children well while they are in your program and for years to come.



Judy Harrison began her career as a foster parent in 1971. Many children later, she decided that more training might be an advantage, went back to college, and became a pediatric RN. The medically fragile foster care program began and she has been committed to those children and birth families for 15 plus years. Being a mom to the six boys and two girls in the Harrison family has kept her busy, but in her spare time she trains resource home families to care for the medically fragile child in foster care. Currently, she is employed by the University of Kentucky Training Resource Center in Lexington, Kentucky. Judy also works as a nurse with the Kentucky Early Intervention Program (First Steps) as a consultant for families who have infants and toddlers with complex medical needs.

Earth Ojibwa Reservation in northwestern Minnesota is working on developing a network of services to support those who care for young children in foster care. We are attempting to develop strong relationships with child protection agencies, both county and Tribal, that work with biological and foster parents. Our goals are:

- to empower the foster family with information on the child in placement
- to get early childhood training to the foster and biological parents
- to clarify expectations for everyone involved
- to set up a cohesive referral network and track referrals to emphasize positive parenting

The White Earth Reservation Child Care Program helps support the foster parent with training, conference scholarship, a lending library, and other program resources. There is an emphasis on reintroducing into their lives Ojibwa culture and tradition which have been known to have their own personal and family healing powers.

## Conclusion

It is often said, "It takes a village to raise a child." As early

childhood professionals we all hope to create better outcomes for our children. Our success in this endeavor demands our collaboration across disciplines to meet the needs of young children now.

## Reference

U.S. Children's Bureau (2001). *The AFCARS Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Resources

The Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families

[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/fedguid.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/fedguid.htm)

Child Welfare League of America

[www.cwla.org/](http://www.cwla.org/)

Cultural Competence

[www.cwla.org/programs/culturalcompetence/cultural-about.htm](http://www.cwla.org/programs/culturalcompetence/cultural-about.htm)

Fosterparenting.com

## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Understanding the process:** Fabre leads us to understand the unique challenges of working with the foster care system. Starting with data — things we need to know and understand — is the first step. Explore what teachers know and understand about the foster care system where you live, and use this article to help make sure everyone is familiar with the process and the agencies involved. Use this information as a resource when children in your program are exposed to the system.

**How can we help?:** Like most good teachers, Fabre and Harrison make us want to help address the needs of children in the foster care system. The list of things we CAN do is so long every reader will find a way to make a contribution. Use the ideas in the article to make a commitment to do something, either individually or as a staff to respond with cultural sensitivity, fulfill the role of early childhood educator for the child and the foster care family, or to implement promising practices to contribute to the well-being of children with their families.

**Sharing what we know:** Fabre makes a strong case for good education and parenting training for foster care parents. Who can better provide such information than the talented faculty in your program? Explore providing such training with the agency in your area responsible for foster care parenting training and volunteer to conduct or sponsor sessions in your facility.