



2018: Issue 2 Adoptalk

Children's Blocked Trust: How Compassionate Care Helps Reverse the Effects of Early Poor Care

By Jon Baylin, PhD, and Dan Hughes, PhD © 2018

Jon Baylin is a clinical psychologist who has been working in the mental health field for 35 years. For the past 20 years, while continuing his clinical practice, he has immersed himself in the study of neuroscience and in teaching mental health practitioners about the brain, giving numerous workshops for mental health professionals on "Putting the Brain in Therapy." Dan Hughes is a clinical psychologist who founded and developed Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), the treatment of children who have experienced abuse and neglect and demonstrate ongoing problems related to attachment and trauma. Several years ago, Dr. Baylin began a collaborative relationship with Dr. Hughes. Their books, Brain Based Parenting (2012) and The Neurobiology of Attachment-focused Therapy (2016) are both in the Norton series on Interpersonal Neurobiology.

"We began to think that changes in a relationship are often the result of changes in a parent's capacity to make sense of her child as a separate, differentiated person with thoughts, feelings, and a mind of his own—to think more reflectively about that child." (Arietta Slade, 2006 p. 640)

From the moment we're born, our brains adapt and evolve according to our experiences. For children exposed to trauma, neglect, or chronic stress, the brain develops strategies to cope, focusing on self-preservation and identifying the next potential threat. Over time, these strategies become behaviors and can persist even when a child enters a safe and nurturing environment. Therefore, understanding how a child's mind is altered by trauma can help parents and professionals better direct their support.

Developing Defenses

Children depend on adults for food, shelter, and protection. Abuse and neglect may jeopardize these safeties, so when a child experiences chronic

Comre hear Jon Baylin and Dan Hughes present an all-day pre-conference session—**Brain-Based Attachment Interventions to Transform Troubled Lives**—at the NACAC conference in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on August 7.

They will also be the keynote speakers on August 8, presenting **What's Adoption Have to Do with It? Creating Trust with Compassion, Comfort, and Joy.**

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distress, the brain uses its pain-relief function—called the analgesic opioid system—to block out feelings of hurt or pain in favor of remaining near the adult who can provide these basic necessities.

In this survival mode, the mind becomes focused not only on basic necessities such as food, but also on identifying the next potential threat. A child pays more attention to the aspects of their environment that are potentially harmful instead of what is safe, comforting, or enjoyable. In other words, while the pain is blocked, so are feelings of joy, love, and affection.

Another part of protecting oneself from future harm is remaining invulnerable. By keeping a distance

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between oneself and others, a child can remain unhurt. As a result, honest and unprotected communication with others—where a child shares their inner life—becomes a luxury rather than a normality.

Developing Behaviors

By blocking emotions and communication, children experiencing abuse are able to protect themselves from chronic, overwhelming pain while still accessing basic necessities. When these strategies become behaviors, however, these children are often labeled “antisocial,” “bad,” “bossy,” or “uncaring.” This perception causes harm too: the child internalizes these titles, believing that they are inherently unlovable or alone in this world.

This societal focus on the negative makes it easier for a foster or adoptive parent to see a child’s defensive behavior as a problem. Together, both the parent and the child internalize these negative titles—the children begin to believe they are unlovable, and the parents begin to believe that the children are inherently bad. The result of

this perception is reactive parenting, where a parent focuses on the negative things about their child and allows the stress of an immediate moment to overcome sustained feelings of love and empathy. This is called parental blocked care.

When parental blocked care is practiced, the child’s defenses are triggered again. Quickly, this becomes a harmful cycle, where hurt leads to blocked senses and communication which leads to more hurt, and so on. Because parental blocked care often results from a focus on a child’s behavior, approaching a child’s journey toward healing from abuse and trauma through behavior change can sometimes be harmful, driving a child deeper into states of shame, rage, disengagement, or isolation.

A Call for Compassion

One would expect empathy to be the solution to this problem—if parents recognize and strive to understand the depths of a child’s pain, all will be okay. In fact, attachment-focused models of treatment highlight the need for parental empathy. However, recent neuroscience research makes our understanding of empathy in treatment for abuse more complicated. In this research, empathy is defined as a response to another person’s display of distress, pain, or struggle. For children who experienced

trauma, these emotional displays are suppressed. Therefore, empathy might be a valuable tool in creating a safe space, but it probably will not be a parent’s first response to a child’s behavior.

Instead, a child’s blocked trust calls for radical compassion, tapping into our brain’s higher functioning and moving beyond faster, lower, defensive reactions. This means recognizing the reasons behind a child’s automatic, triggered behavior even in the most stressful or challenging moments. Neuroscientists call this process mentalization and reflective functioning. This means imagining what’s going on in someone else’s mind and assessing the potential needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, and goals that drive the other person’s actions.

It is in the intense instances—when a child is feeling the most hopeless and unlovable—that a parent must display understanding, care, and acceptance. While this radical compassion might confuse the child, it will also allow and encourage the child to be vulnerable. Then at this stage, a parent’s empathy can be activated, working in tandem with compassion, to foster a child’s trust and buffer against parental blocked care.

Over time, the child will be able to overcome the story that has come to define them. Instead of feeling inher-

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DENISE GOODMAN, President

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Antonio

Antonio is an outgoing child with a great sense of humor who was born in 2006. His favorite school subjects are art, social studies, and science. Antonio likes riding his scooter, listening to music, and animals—especially cats! He has a sibling he keeps in contact with and wants to maintain that relationship in the future. Antonio looks forward to being adopted into a family to call his own. If you feel you can be that family for Antonio, please contact Jean Blattner at Children Awaiting

Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

ently bad or unloved, the child can begin to understand herself as brave, strong, and no longer alone.

Handling the Hardships: Tips for Parents and Professionals

Maintaining constant and unwavering compassion—even and especially in moments of overwhelming strife—is not easy. Part of radical compassion and reflective functioning is understanding that your kindness might be repeatedly rebuffed or rejected by a child struggling to overcome habitual defense systems. This one-sided relationship can be incredibly taxing.

In fact, the Social Baseline Theory—a model of social relationships developed by Jim Coan, a social neuroscientist at the University of Virginia—states that while bonded, trusting relationships reduce stress for each partner, allowing challenging tasks to be shared, a one-sided relationship such as those we’re talking about here places all of the executive load—those higher level regulatory processes that rely heavily on the prefrontal cortex—on the parent. In other words, in addition to offering the child protection from harm, basic necessities, and extreme patience, a parent needs to be sure that the activities a child engages in are safe and also plan for inevitable episodes of challenging behavior.

In a well-bonded relationship, parents and children can occasionally turn off that higher-level thinking to simply enjoy one another’s company or spend time alone. For parents helping a child cope and heal from trauma, those high level self-regulating and reflective systems must always be activated. The effect of this constant drain is sometimes called compassion fatigue, as parents become physically and emotionally exhausted by a child’s constant need for care and empathy.

To access and engage with the part of the mind in charge of mentalization

and combat this compassion fatigue, consider the following tips:

1. **Access your own compassionate support systems.** Studies show that parents who feel safe and secure in their relationship with a child are more capable of accessing this higher level of thinking. Parents who are prone to feeling insecure in intimate relationships inevitably struggle to access and engage this part of the brain. In other words, to practice radical compassion with a child who has experienced trauma, an adult must learn how to practice radical compassion with themselves. Adult therapy or a robust network of personal support is instrumental in feeling more secure in these challenging, often one-sided parent-child relationships.

For professionals offering support: In an effort to be as understanding as possible, mentalizing and reflecting on their child’s needs above all, parents are frequently denied the compassion and empathy they crave in return. Caregivers need compassionate care too—be the understanding and patient support they need. Realistically, not all parents are ready to develop this compassionate state of mind. Assess their readiness and do what you can to encourage them to move beyond reactive parenting.

2. **Develop self-care and coping mechanisms.** To combat the compassion fatigue that comes from carrying the executive load of a relationship, parents must be careful not to neglect their own needs amid caring for another’s. This means trying to maintain a balanced diet, regular sleep, and an exercise routine, as well as relationships with a few caring adults.

For professionals offering support: Recognize the genuine potential for burnout in parents caring for children who have experienced trauma, and encourage them to find moments for themselves throughout the day. Help them to learn coping mechanisms like breathing techniques and acceptance-based therapy.

When a child’s sense of safety and happiness is repeatedly threatened, their brains adjust to focus on survival. Understanding the science behind these reactions can help parents and professionals begin to offer children the radical compassion needed to overcome challenging behaviors and recognize themselves as strong, brave, and capable of love—reversing the effects of the past and creating a brighter future for parents and children alike. ♦



photo by
Petal & Vine Photography

Noah

Born in 2009, Noah’s easy smile and laughter makes those around him smile along. He likes to watch television and play on his iPad but really likes social interaction. Noah continues to grow and exceed expectations. If you could be Noah’s forever family, contact Jean Blattner at Children Awaiting Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

The Community Connections Youth Project: Supporting Success for Youth Who Were in Foster Care

By Nathan Ross

Nathan is an adopted person who shares his story with child welfare workers and policy makers around the country in addition to working directly with people who have been in foster care. As the youth programs supervisor at FosterAdopt Connect, Nathan directly oversees the Community Connections Youth Project and Youth Speak Out. FosterAdopt Connect (formerly Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association) is a nonprofit organization that specializes in solving problems for kids and families involved in and affected by the child welfare system. For more information about the Community Connections Youth Project, contact Nathan at 816-350-0215 x335 or nathan@fosteradopt.org.

The Problem

Each year, about 20,000 young adults age out of the foster care system in the US. Too often, these young people lack the social supports necessary to venture into adulthood successfully. Studies consistently show that young people who exit the foster care system without proper supports are much more likely to become a parent unintentionally, experience years of homelessness, have trouble remaining employed or adequately employed, and populate the prison system.

The Community Connections Youth Project (CCYP) was created after many people asked FosterAdopt Connect to help youth exiting care use Medicaid services. The initial

assumption focused on a belief that young people exiting the Missouri foster care system did not have access to Medicaid and, therefore, were unable to receive adequate mental and physical health treatment. I researched organizations around the country to determine what practices and models existed to help youth access Medicaid. The good news is that I learned that in Missouri young people are automatically signed up for Medicaid services as they exit foster care through the assistance of the Missouri Children's Division. The challenge, however, was that these young people did not take advantage of their health coverage to see a doctor regularly, resulting in an overuse of emergency room services.

Why weren't youth using a support that was available? It emerged that they were often so worried about other aspects of their lives that maintaining quality physical and mental health treatment was at the bottom of their list of priorities. What we know, however, is that when young people abandon regular mental and physical health treatment, it increases the odds that their health issues will affect their ability to maintain employment, which leads to a lack of stable income and other potentially negative outcomes.

So FosterAdopt Connect began looking at how we could help youth address some key issues and help them stabilize their lives. We knew if we did this, they would have more time and energy to invest in maintaining their physical and mental health. Reviewing case management models around the country revealed how organizations were assisting people with accomplishing goals and moving forward in life. By the end of 2015, we piloted a model to meet the needs of Missouri's youth aging out of care—the Community Connections Youth Project.

The Program

The Community Connections Youth Project is a strengths-based model of voluntary peer case management for youth at risk of aging out of foster care or who have already exited the foster care system. This model emphasizes each client's inherent strengths and builds upon existing (or recruited) resources to produce better long-term outcomes for the youth. The primary target population for CCYP is young people who age out of the foster care system but we serve any young adult (17 to 26 years old) who was ever placed in foster care who needs our help. We know, for example, that young people who are adopted from care also face barriers to successfully transitioning to adulthood and often need additional support.



Sharelle

Sharelle is a creative girl who describes herself as “a happy person with a great personality.” Artistically inclined, she likes arts and crafts and has a flair for fashion and design. Born in 2002, Sharelle is smart, funny, and friendly—good attributes to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse. Sharelle hopes to have a forever family who will support

and encourage her in her goals. If your family has a place in your heart and home for Sharelle, please contact Jean Blattner at Children Awaiting Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

Each client is assigned to one of our seven community connections specialists in two offices (Kansas City and Springfield) who can provide support in at least one of the program's eight core domains: housing, education, finances, employment, physical and mental health, transportation, legal assistance, and social supports. The staff specialists have a caseload of 20 clients whom they meet one-on-one for as long as the client needs services.

The Community Connections Youth Project is primarily funded by the state of Missouri, with an operating budget of \$600,000. The budget includes the staff plus more than \$75,000 in emergency assistance for clients each year. The CCYP operating budget also allows for specialists to attend trainings and purchase supplies to best serve clients.

All of the staff connections specialists are alumni of the foster care system. This was established as a core component during the initial development phase. The primary benefit of having foster care alumni as the specialists is the ability to offer peer-to-peer support in addition to the services described above. A peer model of support is at the heart of many programs at FosterAdopt Connect, where we believe that people learn better and are more willing to receive assistance when they can identify with the person providing the assistance. CCYP specialists have informed conversations about how to navigate adulthood and are able to offer encouragement, resources, and coaching to assist clients in making optimal choices. Each specialist receives trauma-informed training and is supervised by another foster care alum.

Services and supports vary based on the client's needs. If someone needs help with transportation, for example, we can offer driving lessons using a company vehicle we have for this purpose. Or we use emergency assistance

dollars to provide bus passes to clients who live on bus lines in major cities. On some occasions, specialists will transport clients to important events or activities, including work, to help clients stabilize while a more permanent solution is identified.

Specialists provide any and all support possible, and no two cases look exactly the same. In the box below is a story of two clients served by CCYP to provide an example of the types of support offered in the program.

Services are offered to young adults as long as the client agrees to engage in services. CCYP's goal is to offer consistent support to young people who have been in care, regardless of their behaviors or attitudes. This is not a program that requires clients to prove their worth in order to receive services. Due to our mission for consistency, connections specialists make a commitment to only terminate services for a client if that young person becomes physically aggressive with the staff.

Supporting Our Staff

Because specialists also experienced foster care and share similar stories to their clients, additional protective factors have to be in place to support staff and help them when clients' circumstances trigger events from their own lives. We've made tweaks to supervision styles to best help employees who have suffered from trauma learn and grow in a stable environment, while also providing realistic and professional expectations. For example, some of our staff are accustomed to environments where people who disagree either yell at each other or quit associating with each other. As staff, this has provided challenges when they need to teach clients how to resolve conflict in a healthy way. Supervisors for CCYP work with specialists regularly on their communication styles and provide coaching to not only teach clients how to handle conflict, but to practice the same techniques themselves.

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Jessica and Nick, who aged out of foster care without a permanent family, were referred to the Community Connections Youth Project from CenterPoint Hospital due to concerns that their soon-to-be-born child would be placed into foster care because they were homeless and unemployed. Kandice, a CCYP specialist, took on both clients and conducted an assessment of their most immediate needs. She began to discover that more issues were present than just unemployment and homelessness. One of the clients was facing three arrest warrants in three different jurisdictions. We were also dealing with intimate partner violence between the two clients, although they wanted to continue living together. Needless to say, Kandice had her work cut out for her.

Kandice's initial work included finding stable housing for the couple. Working with local shelters, Kandice found an apartment and vouchers that would allow Jessica and Nick to move in immediately and have stable housing for up to two years. Kandice was able to get them moved into the apartment and found furnishings so that they could be prepared for their baby. Kandice worked with them on conflict resolution skills to address issues that led to verbal and physical altercations. Kandice also transported them to OB/GYN appointments, ensuring proper prenatal care. Kandice also worked to have the warrants removed, helped both Jessica and Nick find employment, and even helped them get a donated van so that they could transport their family. When it was all done, CenterPoint's social worker called to let us know that she saw such improvement in this young couple that she was dismissing the case they had been building to have the baby brought into care.

Community Connections...

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Outcomes

In 2017, CCYP served 226 clients, with an average age of 20. Of these clients:

- 58 were assisted with educational goals.
- 96 were assisted with obtaining employment.
- 73 were assisted with creating and maintaining a budget.
- 108 were assisted with obtaining or maintaining safe housing.
- 64 were provided with legal services through our legal advocacy program or pro bono connections.
- 70 were connected with appropriate physical and mental health treatment.
- 142 were assisted with obtaining or maintaining social and community support systems.
- 99 were provided with transportation assistance.
- 115 received food, clothing, or household items.

Clients in crisis received a total of more than \$75,000 in emergency assistance to help stabilize their lives.

At this time, we have just begun analyzing how the program has provided benefits and positive changes for clients served. Two trends we have noted thus far relate to employment and housing. We have discovered that clients who engage in CCYP services stay employed for longer periods of time and are beginning to earn more in hourly wages. In addition, our clients are maintaining housing and are at a decreased risk of being homeless, thanks to the work of specialists who help talk to landlords, help clients prepare and maintain budgets, and provide emergency assistance, as possible, to mitigate client crises.

Lessons Learned

In the two years that the program has been operating, we have learned a lot from our clients. One of the most disheartening realizations is the disservice the child welfare system does to young adults exiting care. We have worked with more than 200 young people in varying degrees of crisis, and the most common factor we see is that our clients are vastly underprepared for being on their own.

The young people we work with have their first experiences with managing money, appointments, and overall responsibility when they are completely on their own. They are responsible for making decisions that many

experienced adults would struggle to find answers to—even with support. Many of the youth we serve are forced to come up with solutions on their own, and many fall into desperate situations as a result.

Too many of these young people are going out into the world with a poor understanding of how to navigate adult life on their own, complicated by their past experience of having a worker responsible for addressing problems that arose while they were in care. If an individual has always had someone arrange appointments, schedule their day, and ensure that all necessary expenses are covered, how are they supposed to understand that the responsibility will fall to them when they reach a certain age?

As a system we are sending many people into the world who are chronologically 18 to 21 years old, but at most have only experienced life as a pre-teen. Even young adults growing up in traditional families need the assistance of their parents after age 18. I remember contacting my parents on several occasions in my early and mid-20s when I had overdrawn my bank account or I was unsure how to fill out tax documents. If I did not have the support of my family, I hate to think how my life could have turned out.

We have had great success in CCYP, but we know there is a lot more we can do and we will work with many more young people in the future. I look forward to a day when all young people have achieved permanency and are able to use a support system like CCYP with their family members to make the most of their lives and realize their dreams. ♦



Jackson

Jackson is a friendly boy, born in 2005, who likes sports. Basketball and football are his favorites and he'd like to play in the NBA when he gets older. He also likes to play video and computer games. Jackson enjoys conversation and his favorite subject in school is English. Other favorites include pizza, hamburgers, milkshakes, and animals—particularly dogs. Jackson is a sweet child who would like a family that is patient, kind, and loving, and will be his advocate. If Jackson would be a great addition to your

family, please contact Jean Blattner at Children Awaiting Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

Protect Immigrating Children

By Anna Libertin, NACAC's communications specialist, and Mary Boo, NACAC's executive director

Earlier this spring, the US was highly focused on the impact of the Department of Homeland Security's "zero tolerance" immigration policy that forcibly separated thousands of families, sending children to massive detention centers across the country while their parents were placed in other centers or deported. As an organization dedicated to children who have been separated from their birth families, NACAC joined a chorus of child welfare community members by calling for a stop to this government-sanctioned traumatization.

After national outcry, the Trump administration issued an executive order to end the brutal separations. While this was a small step in the right direction, we cannot stop advocating for the needs of these vulnerable children—both those who have already been separated from their parents and the thousands more who now face indefinite detention. By imprisoning thousands of babies, toddlers, children, and teens—and neglecting thousands of children already separated from their parents—the US government continues to inflict lifelong damage upon children whose parents are fleeing danger in their home countries.

Of the thousands of children separated from their families, only about 500 have been reunited so far. With the executive order failing to address the still-separated children, the Department of Health and Human Services making no definite plans for further reunification, and generally poor recordkeeping, NACAC and other child advocates are concerned about the future of children living away from their parents across the country—particularly as we hear that children as young as three are appearing in court without parents or legal advocates.

And now the administration is seeking to keep children and their parents detained indefinitely, trading the hor-

ror of separating families for the horror of incarcerating children. There are not nearly enough places to safely and humanely house families; many of the centers lack the resources to provide children with the bare necessities. Private prisons—clearly no place for children and families—are now stepping forward to fill the manufactured need.

We know that the government is familiar with the grievous effects of inappropriate child imprisonment: several court orders have declared this practice unconstitutional in the past, notably the 1997 *Flores* settlement, which makes it illegal to detain immigrant children with their parents for more than 20 days. In spite of all we know about the harm that led to these court decisions, the US Justice Department is calling for modification of the orders that forbid the detention of immigrant children,

If courts overturn the *Flores* settlement, children in immigrating families could be detained for months or even years. If courts refuse to modify the ruling, these children will face the devastating reality of parent-child separation after 20 days of family detainment. In either case, the government-sanctioned child abuse proposed by the original policy won't be over—it will have just taken a different form.

The fight for ensuring these children's protection is nowhere near over. NACAC calls upon the

US government to affirm its commitment to protecting all children's best interests by finding a permanent, humane solution for the children whose families are simply seeking safety in our country. We demand that the thousands of children already harmed by this "zero-tolerance" policy be reunified with their parents, and that the injuries inflicted upon them be properly and promptly remedied.

We also call on the adoption and child welfare communities to continue to speak out on behalf of these children, to fight to keep or reunite them with their parents, and to provide support to address the trauma that has already been done. Children and families deserve no less. ♦

Here's how you can speak up:

Volunteer. Several organizations in border states, like the Texas Civil Rights Project, are seeking volunteers with legal experience and volunteers who can speak Spanish, Mam, Q'eqchi or K'iche to advocate for these children, assist with legal intake, and interview families. Registered nurses can sign up with National Nurses United to volunteer services to immigrant detention centers as well.

Support advocates. If you don't meet the qualifications for volunteering, consider donating to organizations working to protect children at the border. The Texas Civil Rights Project, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, the Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) all rely on donations to provide immigrant families with the services they need to survive this stage.

Contact your elected representatives. As a constituent, your voice is important to the people who represent you in Congress. Congress has the power to create permanent, humane solutions to this issue. Call and send messages to your elected representative demanding better treatment for immigrating children. Visit CallMyCongress.com for more information.

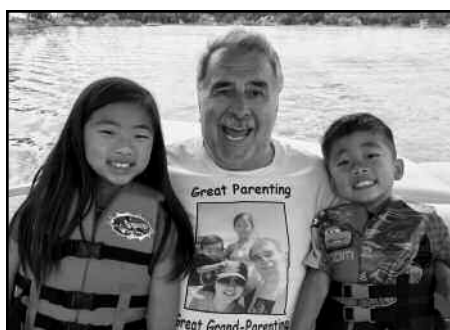
Speak out. Do research on this issue and share your efforts with the people around you. In this way, your advocacy can be multiplied: show your friends why and how to donate, call Congress, or volunteer through Facebook and Twitter or in person. ♦

NACAC Honors Child Welfare Leaders

At the 2018 North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) conference in St. Paul, we will honor extraordinary individuals and organizations for their contributions to the world of adoption and child welfare.

Child Advocate of the Year (and Millenium)

Joe Kroll, Child Welfare Consultant and Former NACAC Executive Director, Minnesota



A proud adoptive and birth father—and grandfather—Joe Kroll began work with NACAC in 1975, and served as NACAC's executive director from 1985 to 2015. Over his 30+ years of service, Joe helped NACAC grow from a small grassroots organization to a renowned nonprofit serving thousands of adoptive, foster, and kinship families and professionals each year.

In addition to running NACAC, Joe trained parent group leaders and worked with individual families to help them obtain post-adoption support. A dedicated advocate for change, Joe testified before Congress and spoke at the White House to demand system reforms that would better serve vulnerable children and families. Joe's leadership and advocacy was vital to enhancement and passage of several key legislative efforts, including the Adoptive and Safe Families Act, laws making the adoption tax credit more accessible to families who adopt from foster care, and the Fostering Connections Act.

Upon leaving NACAC in 2016, Joe continued his commitment to improving the system as interim director of Voice for Adoption (VFA), and today he serves on the VFA advisory board.

In addition to his own advocacy, Joe was a leader in ensuring that the voices of parents and youth were heard in efforts to change policy and practice. For more than four decades, Joe has brought together parents, professionals, and policymakers to improve the lives of adoptive families throughout the US and Canada. NACAC extends incredible gratitude to Joe—we would not be what we are today without you.

Parent Group of the Year

South Carolina Foster Parent Association, South Carolina



In the 44 years since Carl and Mary Brown first became foster parents, they have fostered more than 200 children and adopted six. Soon after they began fostering in 1974, Carl and Mary become involved in the National Foster Parent Association, which made them realize the impact of local support and accessible training for foster families.

From this realization they founded the South Carolina Foster Parent Association (SCFPA), which offers support to foster parents. Since its founding, SCFPA's programming not only helps foster parents provide for their children's needs, but also helps children academically, socially, psychologically, and emotionally. Programs like *Smart Fun. Strong Kids!* and *Kids Make Music* encourage children in foster care to become creative and fun-loving, while awards and scholarships like the *Teen Recognition and Scholarship Awards* and the *On the Road Again* programs give youth between 18 and 21 opportunities to pursue higher education and employment opportunities.

Recently, SCFPA began the South Carolina Adoption Support Program, helping both families who have been approved for adoption but have not been matched with children and families who have finalized an adoption. SCFPA also honors hardworking social workers with the Caseworker of the Month program.

For their robust services and innovative programs, it is SCFPA's turn to be

Jared



Jared is a kind and caring boy. He describes himself as handy and loves working with tools and fixing things. Born in 2003, Jared is smart, does well in school, and likes all his classes. He also likes sports and wants to play on a football team. Jared is excited about the prospect of a forever family. He would like an understanding family capable of unconditional love. Bonus if they have a dog! If you believe Jared would be a great fit for your family, please contact Jean Blattner at Children Awaiting Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

appreciated. NACAC recognizes the powerful effect of your thorough programming on families in South Carolina. Thank you for all you do.

Youth Advocate of the Year

Lexie Grüber, Health and Public Service Consultant at Accenture, Child Welfare Advocate, New York



After seven and a half years in Connecticut's foster care system, Lexie Grüber became a passionate and talented advocate for improving the

services that provide lifelines for vulnerable children and families. With almost 10 years working in the public and private sector collectively, Lexie's dedication to reforming and perfecting the US's social safety net is obvious. In addition to her day-to-day advocacy, Grüber testified before the US Senate Finance Committee and the Connecticut state legislature, while also presenting at several Congressional briefings on child welfare issues. Together, these efforts helped spur the Family First Prevention Services Act, which was signed into law in February 2018.

Lexie has also been published in world-renowned publications such as the *Washington Post* and the *Huffington Post* and provided the keynote addresses at national conferences including the American Bar Association's National Conferences on Children and Law. Her unyielding efforts to improve systems and services for vulnerable children and families are the subject in Russell Simmons' upcoming documentary *Lost in America*.

In only a few years, Grüber has become a revolutionary child advocate. She transformed her experiences into national change, and NACAC is excited to see what she will do next.

Champions for Change

Michelle Chalmers and Ampersand Families, Minnesota



Ampersand Families has spent the decade since its founding recruiting and supporting permanent families for older youth. As Minnesota's only nonprofit focused on permanency for the oldest, longest-waiting youth, Ampersand is a leader in providing adoptive families with the support they need to help their children cope with trauma and in securing youths' right to restore and retain important family relationships. Through partnerships with public and private agencies and the hard work of Ampersand staff, 130 youth—almost all over the age of 10—have secured permanency.

Ampersand's co-founder Michelle Chalmers—who aged out of Colorado's foster care system—has used her experiences to work with, and on behalf of, youth in out-of-home care for 30 years. Chalmers' work focuses on bringing young people's voices into the child welfare system and is dedicated to the right of youth to have, maintain, and develop meaningful relationships with family, kin, and community. Chalmers developed and leads national and international workshops for foster and adoptive parents, social workers, CASA/GAL volunteers, youth, and more. She has written two books in partnership with youth in care. Under her leadership, a permanent supportive housing program in St. Paul is home to 12 young people facing homelessness upon leaving foster care or other residential placement. In her personal life, Chalmers provided home and support to six young adults through host home and foster care.

NACAC extends recognition to all who help in Ampersand's life-changing work, including Renee Banas (Minnesota Heart Gallery coordinator and program administrator), Misty Coonce (program director), Al Willig (finance and operations director) and permanency specialists Cecily Ferguson, Darlene Hall, Perry Huff, Kate Mejicano, Courtney Moore, Christina Romo, and Bridget Sabo.

Messerli & Kramer, Minnesota



Since 2016, Minnesota law firm Messerli & Kramer has worked closely with NACAC on a pro bono basis to provide our organization with the resources needed to ensure that every child has a family. With their 200 years of experience before the Minnesota legislature, the government relations team designed a strategy to convince legislators to dedicate a significant pool of federal funding to peer support, mental health, and family services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families. Because of Messerli & Kramer's hard work and dedication, families across Minnesota will be better equipped to raise children who have experienced the trauma of separation from their birth parents.

As a leading law firm in the Twin Cities, Messerli & Kramer is dedicated to helping nonprofits complete their mission and navigate the complex legal system. NACAC especially thanks members of the government relations team—Patrick Hynes, John Apitz, James Clark, Nancy Haas, Sandy Neren, Tom Poul, and Katy Sen.

We are grateful to the amazing work of all of our award winners! ♦

Destination Family: Achieving Permanency for Children and Youth Through Relationship Development Matching

By Sandy Sertyn

Sandy Sertyn, LMFT, is a Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter with Sierra Forever Families. She is a lead clinical permanency worker for Sierra Forever Families' Destination Family program. Sierra Forever Families boasts a long-lasting commitment to permanence for all children in foster care. Over the past 13 years, the agency has played an active role in recruitment programs for youth in foster care who are considered harder to place. These efforts have been in collaboration with Sacramento County Child Protective Services and community partners such as Capitol Kids are Waiting and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoptions Wendy's Wonderful Kids Program. For more information about Destination Family, contact Sandy at ssertyn@sierraff.org.

Sierra Forever Families' Destination Family program finds and supports adoptive families for children in foster care. Without specialized permanency services such as this, many more youth would age out of the system without the support they need. With a focus much broader than recruitment, the Destination Family team wraps supports around children to prepare them for a family and, once a family is located, supports the family through to finalization.

Background

Destination Family began as a public/private collaboration, funded through an Adoption Opportunities grant that ran from 2003 to 2008. The program used evidence-based and -informed services to support children, find families, and support the permanent family. During the Adoption Opportunities grant, 136 youth (87 percent of the children served) were placed or found a family connection, including through adoption, guardianship, reunification with

birth family, or other permanent connections or commitments.

There have been several reincarnations of the Destination Family program since the Adoption Opportunities grant ended, each growing in scope and success. Currently, the Destination Family team consists of seven specialized permanency workers, overseen and supported by a permanency supervisor. Of the seven, three are partially funded by outside grant sources, including two who are Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiters. Regardless of the funding source, the permanency workers follow a common methodology in youth preparation and recruitment.

Destination Family serves children in Sacramento County from birth to age 18 who have one or more identified barriers to adoption. Barriers include having emotional or developmental disabilities, being part of a large sibling group, being older, or having medical challenges. The program currently serves more than 100 youth at any time. Of those served, 99 percent have behaviors consistent with childhood trauma that affect their ability to connect with another family.

Relationship Development Matching

The Destination Family methodology is built on the foundation of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption's Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruitment model. The model uses specific interrelated steps or tasks:

1. Initial child referral
2. Relationship-building with the child
3. Case record review
4. Assessment of the child's adoption readiness
5. Adoption preparation
6. Network building



Yasmyn

Born in 2001, Yasmyn is a smart, funny, and outgoing girl who enjoys reading, drawing, and hanging out with her friends. She likes sports and being outdoors, and plays soccer and softball and does gymnastics. Some of Yasmyn's favorite foods are vanilla ice cream, carrots, grapes, and popcorn. Someday, she would love to go on a cruise. Yasmyn is an excellent student. She does well in school, earns good grades, and enjoys her peers. Yasmyn would like an adoptive family who is lov-

ing, supportive, attentive, and encouraging and who would support her desire to maintain her relationship with her siblings. If you believe Yasmyn would be a great addition to your family, contact Jean Blattner at Children Awaiting Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

7. Recruitment plan
8. Diligent search
9. Matching and post-matching activities

When used consistently, this approach has been proven to dramatically increase positive permanency outcomes for children who have one or more barriers to adoption.

Recruitment is only step one of the process. Early on, Destination Family staff realized that it takes more than just a willing family and a child in need to achieve permanency. Many of the children and teens we worked with did not want anything to do with adoption or permanency. Grief and loss stemming from entry into foster care and negative experiences along the way left them unwilling to embrace the concept of adoption. In addition, most had behaviors that made them likely to struggle if they were placed in an unprepared home. It was evident that our first steps had to be to really get to know the youth and work with them to rebuild the disruption in their attachment patterns caused by the loss of their families of origin. These young people needed to learn to trust, and to develop a desire to be part of a family again.

In response, we developed the Relationship Development Matching model (RDM) to add to our recruitment efforts. This replicable model is designed to move a child in foster care from initial referral through to legal permanence with a loving family. Every case is individual and is treated as such. It is our job to find ways to help children heal and make sense of their journey, while simultaneously identifying, supporting, and preparing the right family. We believe that all children are inherently ready for a family—now—regardless of behavioral issues or special needs. Children heal best within the context of a safe and loving family and our goal is to help them get there.

Below are the steps we at Destination

Family take to increase a child's chance of finding a permanent family. In practice, the steps are not linear and often happen at the same time or multiple times.

Initial Referral

Children are referred to our program by Sacramento County child protection services (CPS) staff. The assigned Destination Family permanency worker makes every effort to accompany the CPS worker on the visit. This allows us to begin the relationship with the youth and the foster family or caregiver. At this first meeting, we carefully define our role as a support to the CPS worker. Because we have no idea how the youth or foster family view permanency, we do not discuss moving the youth into an adoptive placement.

We often find youth or families aren't on board with permanency. A young person might see adoption as a scary unknown they'd like to avoid. Some experienced foster parents may have had a past experience with workers who they feel may have moved too quickly to adoptive placement and as a result the child experienced painful disruption. We want to respect the youth's and family's view of permanency and, if necessary, begin to change it over time in the context of a consistent supportive relationship.

Relationship-Building with the Child

Relationship is the core of everything we do. It provides vital information on understanding how the youth sees the world: what is their attachment style, what is their developmental level, and how do they understand their own story? These things tell us how to move forward. We visit at least once a month, and often more in the beginning. We spend the time to get to know the child's strengths, interests, and needs. We take it slow, learning more about the child over time and never pushing too hard for deeper or more personal information.

During the visits, we use elements of Family Attachment Narrative Ther-

apy (FANT) (<http://www.familyattachment.com/>) as a guide to understanding the child's relationship needs in a safe and respectful way. FANT was developed for use with adoptive parents and we modify the program to be more appropriate to our relationship with the child. For example, we use the third person perspective when dealing with tough issues or when gently probing distorted perceptions. This allows the child to consider an idea more abstractly (it's about someone else, not them) without being put on the defensive or shutting down.

Assessing a child's attachment style is an important part of what we do. For example, some children have indiscriminate attachment styles. Within 10 minutes, they love you and can't wait to see you again. This tells us we will need to help them develop healthier boundaries. In finding potential permanency options, we will need a family that understands that despite what the child says, they will need time to really develop a safe and loving relationship. Other children are reluctant to engage. They may take more time to develop a level of trust with us and potential families. We respect that and may plan visits frequently, but for shorter periods of time.

Our goal is to develop a healthy relationship with the child and maximize opportunities to model for them, over time, how to be in such relationships.

Case Record Review

As we build the relationship, we are also beginning to develop a recruitment strategy. Using the CPS database, we can look up any digital file in their system. We also request all archived paper files. We go through files page by page, often finding random notes in the margin about people who voiced interest in the child over the years. We are also on the lookout for friends or family members who may have been ruled out.

...continued on page 12

Destination Family...

continued from page 11

Sometimes we find that life situations have changed, or that what may have been an inappropriate placement for a 5-year-old may be more appropriate for a now 15-year-old.

The case record review also allows us to identify any unmet support needs, so we can work to have those needs met. To accomplish this, we use a life domain approach. When we are going through historical data, we are alert for any needs in medical, mental health, relationship, cultural, educational, or spiritual elements of the child's life. For example, if we see repeated entries on court reports documenting academic challenges for the youth, we would look to see if the appropriate supports are in place. If they are not, we bring it to the CPS worker's attention and work to establish necessary supports for the child now. By carefully addressing the child's needs and supports across domains, we are also better able to understand and speak to the strengths, challenges, and ongoing needs of our youth.

In going through these records, we also put together crucial information for full disclosure with potential placements. The information we gather allows us to address the child's experiences and need for ongoing support. We also identify and trace

separated siblings and often re-establish some form of contact. Many times, youth are opposed to adoption because they see it as the reason why they lost contact with their brother or sister. By re-establishing contact, the youth can begin to move from seeing adoption as loss, to understanding it as an increase in people to love and be loved by.

Network Building

With network building, we identify service providers past and present and determine current levels of support. We connect directly with each provider—from the foster care agency's social worker to the teacher and therapist. We want to know what they are working on with the child and determine how they view the child's strengths and challenges.

We have found that everyone has their own thoughts about adoption. Even when well-intentioned, any one of these support persons can undermine our efforts to achieve permanence. It helps for us to meet in person with them early in the process to explain what we do and why. This can create a supportive partnership and avoid miscommunication down the road. The extended network can also provide leads on potential supports or even potential families we would not otherwise have known about.

Adoption Assessment and Preparation

The adoption assessment is accomplished as we develop rapport with the youth. We listen carefully to what the child says about past and current placements. We generate conversations about future hopes and dreams. We begin to formulate an idea of the child's willingness to move toward permanency while determining if and how we need to help the child develop an openness to the concept. This initial assessment provides the groundwork for our adoption preparation efforts.

Every time we visit a child, we have purpose and intent to help with adoption preparation. Sometimes this is as simple as playing "Guess Who Lives There." While driving through neighborhoods we identify random houses. Each of us will take turns guessing what type of family lives in the home. From how the child identifies families, we learn what they like and what they don't. We also learn about their preconceptions about people or lifestyles, and can determine if these are deeply held beliefs or just something they have heard. We then have a better idea of what might work well when we are looking for a permanent family. Games like this have proven much more informative than going down a list of family attributes and asking what type of family they want.

Recruitment Plan

We develop a Recruitment Plan for each child or sibling group—a written document of how we plan to proceed in finding permanence. This is a living document that can and does change regularly, and includes what has worked and what hasn't.

Diligent Search

We begin a diligent search by going through electronic and paper files looking for references to people who may have had a positive relationship with the child. Our goal is to find friends and relatives and determine if there has been follow up for place-



Aarionna

Aarionna is an adorable, resilient girl with an infectious smile. Her favorite activities include drawing, painting, and making arts and crafts. Aarionna likes to ride her bike, eat her favorite snack foods (chocolate and potato chips!), and write poetry. She can often be found singing along to her favorite songs on the radio. Aarionna was born in 2001. Around new people she is quiet at first, but it's not long before it's clear she is a good and funny conversationalist. Aarionna is looking forward to being adopted. If you are the family for Aarionna, please contact Jean Blattner at Children

Awaiting Parents: jean@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ♦

ment or if they may be a possible support.

We also submit identifying information on the birth family to the Seneca Family of Agencies' search professionals. Seneca has trained staff who use multiple search databases to provide a customized report containing comprehensive information. This report produces up to 30 years of address history, phone numbers, aliases, death notices, up to 30 possible relatives, up to 20 possible family connections, and neighbors with phone numbers.

From this list, we locate family members who are appropriate for further research. We send out generic letters of introduction to these individuals, inviting them to contact us. If they do, we arrange to meet them and thoroughly assess their interest in establishing or re-establishing a relationship with the youth.

We try to avoid directly asking the youth whom they want us to find, because this sets up an expectation that may not come to fruition and may feel like another rejection. We do a considerable amount of work behind the scenes before ever presenting any option to the child.

We do, however, get input from the youth by having them identify people they think about or have lost touch with. We do this in the context of normal conversation rather than an interview or questionnaire. We are constantly on alert for people they may bring up during activities. For instance, during a walk through a thrift shop, a teen might see a baking pan that triggers a memory of their godmother's special cake. We can then gently ask more, and learn about the context as well as other individuals that may be related to that memory. This tactic often produces more results than a genogram would. It also helps us understand not only who is important to our youth, but what about that person made them special. This helps in defining the type of family a child might best gel with.

Matching and Post-Matching Activities

We use all the information we've gathered, including the information on life domains and the child's wishes, to help us determine if a family might be a good fit for a child. When it is time to introduce a youth to a potential adoptive family, the trusting relationship we have nurtured is critical. We use our relationship as a bridge to encourage the youth to get to know the new family. Children who might otherwise be reluctant or refuse to meet a family will do so because they trust our relationship. We do not label the family as an adoptive family because at this point, it is literally only someone we want them to meet. We continue assessing each visit and checking in with the child, the foster family, the potential adoptive family, and others. If all goes well the child moves in with the family and our focus changes from direct interaction with the child, to supporting the parent in becoming that healing relationship.

It is not uncommon for a family to want to expedite the process or force belonging before bonding with the child or developing attunement. Destination Family staff make a conscious effort to support both the youth and the family throughout the process. We continue to use Relationship Development Matching during this process, and we've found we can transition that healing to the family by initially concentrating on developing the bond, and later helping the family to help the youth heal.

In California, the parental rights are not terminated until a permanent family is found. For this reason, we are active in the lives of the youth and family for at least a year after placement. We find this to be helpful because the child and family continue to experience a variety of issues related to the legal processes and becoming a family. We continue to support and coach the family in meeting the child's needs. In addition, we help the family access outside services. Sometimes our job is as

simple as reinforcing our belief in the parent's ability to keep moving forward and helping them to see how far they have come.

Conclusion

In October 2017, California Assembly Bill 1006 was passed. This bill was inspired by the statewide need for specialized permanency programs to ensure children are able to achieve and maintain permanency. The bill outlines the need for adoption-competent mental health services and specialized permanency services. It is an acknowledgement that without specialized permanency services like those of Destination Family, many of the most vulnerable children and teens in foster care may never find their forever family.

The law heralds the need to do things differently if we want to achieve a different outcome. Destination Family and Relationship Development Matching represent one way to achieve this goal. We hope efforts such as these spread across the US and Canada to ensure that all children who need a family have one! ♦

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Co-Parenting or Shared Parenting

By Phyllis J. Stevens

Phyllis Stevens is a foster and adoptive parent and founder of Together As Adoptive Parents, an adoptive parent support network, in Pennsylvania. She also helped start the Philadelphia Resource Parent Association and currently works for the Youth Law Center under the Quality Parenting Initiative. Phyllis also serves as a consultant to NACAC, helping train and support parent group leaders.

Foster care placements have two main goals. First, to reunite the child with the birth family. Second, to minimize the trauma that has been shown to occur for children after multiple moves. Because of the pivotal role foster parents play in a child's life, many states now call foster families "resource families"—they are a resource for reunification and a resource for adoption. In other words, no matter what the outcome, a resource parent is there to help children develop stronger connections, either with the birth family, the foster parent and their family, or other caregivers who plan to parent the child.

Often for foster parents, helping a child develop these essential attachments means mentoring or connecting with the birth family to better prepare everyone for eventual reunification.

This is called shared parenting, a practice in which foster parents cultivate positive, supportive relationships with birth parents. Shared parenting relationships are based on trust, while keeping the safety and best interests of the child in focus. Some also call this process co-parenting, described on Wikipedia as "a parenting situation where two or more adults work together to raise a child even though they are not necessarily the biological parents, living together, or in a romantic relationship."

Years ago, foster parents could not adopt a child in their care, nor was it common for them to be in close contact with the birth family. However, recent practice and research reveals that maintaining regular contact between the foster parent and the birth parent benefits everyone. Why?

Consider the following advantages of shared parenting:

- Feelings of grief and loss that both a child and a birth parent might feel upon separating are minimized. Children can see their birth family is okay and still loves them—this can help a child relax.
- The child's relationship with the birth parent can be maintained.
- Foster parents can form a realistic picture of the birth parent's strengths and needs.
- The birth parents can be reassured that their child is in a nurturing and stable home.
- Foster parents can model effective parenting. By knowing what good parenting looks like, birth parents can practice parenting skills.
- Foster parents can ask birth parents about the child's schedules, fears, allergies, sleep habits, likes, and dislikes. Foster parents can also learn culturally specific child-care strategies from birth family members, which can enhance a child's cultural identity.
- Birth parents can view the foster family as a resource rather than a threat. Planning for visitation can be simplified. Transitions back into the birth parent's home can be smoother. After the child returns home, there can be ongoing support.

While there are significant benefits to shared parenting, one must be aware of the potential challenges that shared parenting introduces. Challenges such as:

- Initial feelings of anger or resentment by the birth parent towards the resource parent. This anger is often an expression of grief at family separation, the result of feeling judged, or the result of viewing a resource family as a threat to the birth parent's personal relationship with the child.
- Children feeling conflicted by loyalties to both their foster and birth families.
- Potential safety risks for the child or the resource parent, depending on the situation.
- A change in a child's behavior before or after a visit with the birth family, as a result of coping with stress or feeling triggered by past trauma.
- Resource parents disliking what the parent did to the child or what the parents allowed others to do to the child.

Below is a list of tips and tricks to avoid these challenges. If you or someone you know is interested in shared or co-parenting, the following ideas can help:

- Keep journals on the activities of the children and share them with the birth family.
- Take pictures of the child's activities to share with the birth family and display pictures of the birth family in the child's room and in your home.
- Save notes, schoolwork, art projects, etc. for the birth parents.
- Facilitate phone calls between the child and the birth family.
- Provide transportation to and from visits when possible.

Some materials adapted from:

Fostering Perspective, Vol. 15, No 1, 2010
The Foster Care Review, "The Reviewer May 2010"

- Assist and encourage the birth family and the child to work on a lifebook together. Include birth family members in school activities such as conferences, parents' nights, and athletic events as well as in medical or dental appointments. This can allow the birth parents to practice normal parenting skills while the resource parent plays a mentoring and supportive role.
- Allow family interactions to take place in the resource family home and involve the birth parents in normal child care tasks such as bathing, feeding, reading stories, or tucking into bed. ♦

For Professionals:

Resource families and birth families aren't the only ones who need to work to establish connection in order for shared parenting to work. As more and more agencies encourage face-to-face interactions between foster and birth parents, case managers need to be properly trained to handle this new, complex relationship. This means:

1. More training for case managers to better supervise visits that include both the birth parent and the foster parent.
2. New ways to arrange visits with the birth parents and the foster parent, without adding too much

complexity or taking too much time.

3. Better rules around what case managers can and cannot share with the foster families.
4. More training to understand the dynamics of attachment in young children and how to navigate that dynamic successfully.

No matter what the outcome might be, the co-parenting process is critical for the child, and well worth a foster family's effort. By working to establish shared parenting practices, a foster family not only provides a child with a safe and nurturing home...they can change a child's life forever! ♦

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