Develop and Support Families

A New Approach

For years, the child welfare field has talked about “retention” of foster and adoptive families, but the idea of retention has focused mainly on the needs of agencies rather than the needs of families. We recognize that many child welfare systems such as yours are concerned about retaining families in order to have a large enough pool to pull from for children and youth in foster care, but there is a better approach.

We encourage you to focus on actively developing and supporting both prospective and current foster and adoptive families, rather than focusing on retaining them. By meeting a family’s needs, you increase their ability to address each child’s unique needs, while also strengthening their relationship with your child welfare system. The traditional view of retention suggests passively holding onto families, whereas development and support involves building and nurturing a relationship with families so that they continue to feel equipped to meet the needs of children and youth.

The idea of developing and supporting families is a significant departure from the old approach of retaining families. The information below highlights ways to shift from a “retention” approach to a “development” approach.

What Does “Developing Families” Mean?

Having a pool of well-prepared and supported families makes it possible for your child welfare system to provide placement stability and permanency for children and youth in foster care. By actively and continually developing the foster, adoptive, and kinship families working with your child welfare system, you can help ensure that you will have a pool of families who will be able to meet the needs of the children and youth they are parenting. Just as your staff needs ongoing professional development in order to meet the ever-changing demands of their work, families need ongoing development so they can feel competent in caring for children and youth, accessing appropriate and high-quality services, and advocating for their children’s needs.

Continued on page 2
How to Focus on Developing Families

Development begins at first contact with a family. Each step of the process should be increasing the family’s ability to meet the unique needs of a child in foster care. Additionally, when you place a child with a family, recognize the need to continuously help the family develop their skills and capacity to meet that child’s specific needs. Partner with the family to determine what additional information, parenting strategies, and other support will help them feel confident and capable about parenting the child.

When a child leaves a family’s home—whether for reunification, another placement, or permanency—have an “exit interview” with the family. Through this discussion you can help the family process their questions or grief about the child leaving their home, share insights about what worked well as the family parented the child, and identify new developmental needs for the family to help them feel better equipped for future placements.

Prospective families want to feel confident that your agency will help them be prepared to meet the needs of children and youth in foster care. Your response to families when they first inquire about foster care or adoption sends a strong message to them about what kind of relationship they can expect to have with your agency.

Family Development and Support as Active, Integrated Processes

Many child welfare systems think of “family support” as a set of post-placement services, but truly effective support is integrated into a child welfare system’s efforts to develop families from their first point of contact with the child welfare agency.

Support for families can—and should—take many forms. As you directly engage with individual families, you have the opportunity to learn more about what each family needs to feel supported and to build a positive relationship with your agency. By building parents’ skills and confidence, you not only help them feel supported, you also help ensure that your pool of families can meet the diverse and specific needs of children and youth in foster care.

Strategies for Developing and Supporting Families

www.nrcdr.org/develop-and-support-families