NFPA Position Statement

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THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF FOSTER OR RESOURCE FAMILIES AS TEAM MEMBERS AND LEADERS TO ACHIEVE PERMANENCE FOR CHILDREN IN OUR CARE, BEGINNING WITH FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Background

In the 1970s, child welfare research evidenced that children have the need for permanence, recognized as parental continuity and commitment, and the legal and social status that comes from having a family of one's own*. Subsequent federal and state laws --- the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the more recent Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 – as well as federal and state administrative regulations have affirmed the legal right of children to be connected to relationships that are safe, nurturing, and enduring. Therefore, when children cannot live safely with their parents, and relatives are not able to care for their younger family members, child welfare agencies turn to foster or resource families**.

Infants, children, and youth who have experienced loss and trauma, especially from neglect and physical and sexual abuse, have special, if not extraordinary, needs. The social, economic, cultural, racial and other systemic injustices that contribute to the separation of children and parents are compelling. While these issues are beyond the scope of this Position Statement, the NFPA recognizes that policies, programs, and practices that can prevent the separation of children and parents and support relatives or kinship caregivers to protect and nurture their younger family members are essential. Until those systems are in place, the need to recruit, develop, assess, support, train, and retain foster or resource families with special if not extraordinary skills will continue to be a decades-old challenge.***

Both public and private child welfare agency, as well as advocacy organizations, understand that separating children from their parents because of abuse or neglect, and having those children experience more loss and trauma while in the care of child protective services is disturbing for children, all their families, professionals and policymakers. Therefore, the National Foster Parent Association advances this position statement in support of the essential role of foster families as team members and leaders to support permanence for children in our care, recognizing family reunification as the first priority.

The Central Role of Foster or Resource Parents in Family Reunification

It was over 62 years ago when foster care researchers, Maas and Engler, published the first comprehensive national study of children in foster care. Titled "Children in Need of Parents" their work documented what today is understood as just logical: contact between children in foster care and their parents is the single best predictor of reunification. In the 1980s, it was documented that parent-child contact must be an essential part of every service plan. Over the years, states agencies have developed guidelines to create and support contact between children and their parents. More recently, building on strength-based words and expressions, the concept of "Family Time" has replaced "Visitation" to help ensure the opportunity for planned and safe opportunities, spaces, and places for children and parents to connect with each other. These critical arrangements cannot occur with the foster or resource parents having a central role. Family Time emphasizes that achieving the goal of family reunification requires planned relationship-building which happens with clear goals, roles, responsibilities, and outcomes. This is not visiting. Further, all public and private agencies providing family foster care services must have Family Time – in concept, values, and practice – embedded in a model of practice that addresses the following questions:

1. In what ways is the role of foster or resource families clearly defined as team members or leaders in to support safety, well-being, and permanence for every child that joins their family (note: "join" is strength-based alternative to "placed" – respecting that children are not objects).

2. How is it clear to all members of a foster or resource family (including birth and previously adopted children) what being a foster or resource family means. Is it clear, also, that team members, for example, are working collaboratively with agency staff; team leaders may be co-faciliating training, representing their agencies in policy-making and advocacy endeavors.

3. In what ways it is recognized that the first goal of family foster care is parent reunification or unification with relatives and that foster or resource families are essential to achieving that goal?

4. How are agency staff - direct service, supervisors, managers – trained and accountable to support the essential role of foster or resource families as team members or leaders in using Family Time to support reunification or unification?

5. In what ways are agency staff and foster or resource families trained to support aspects of Family Time that are impacted by issues involved substance use, behavioral and physical health, incarceration, family violence?

6. How are agency staff and foster and resource families trained to use Family Time work tools that involve relationship building with parents, relatives, other foster or resource families that may be caring for other siblings.

7. How are the courts supporting the role of staff and foster families in support of the birth families to achieve family reunification?

8. In what ways do public and private agency staff and resource families demonstrate cultural responsivness in relationship building with birth parents and families of children in their custody and care?

9. What clinical skills are being used to support anxiety, loss, trauma, and other feelings that can be a natural part of the Family Time experience for all the children --- those in care, born to the foster or resource family or previously adopted)? Are these clinical skills being provided by the child welfare agency or a mental health agency and, if the latter, how are those skills being coordinated?

10. What is the model of practice that public and private family foster care agencies use to minimize disruptions, recognizing that disruptions increase loss and trauma and reduce opportunities for reunification?

In summary, the National Foster Parent Association has a three-part mission: to educate, network, and advocacy. To advance this mission, the NFPA members and staff – in collaboration with other organizations and agencies – respectfully requests that all family foster care agencies share their responses to the above 10 questions for NFPA to post on our website. This strategy provides an opportunity for education, networking, and advocacy in support of the essential role of foster or resource families to help achieve permanency for the children in our care, beginning with family reunification but modifying for adoption, guardianship or kinship care as needed.

References

* U.S. Children's Bureau published the article about the Oregon Project documenting continuity, commitment, legal and social status in its magazine, *Children Today* (pages 4-5, 25-26, November-December 1976).

** Referring to foster parents as resource parents dates back to the 1980s with the creation of *Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP)* which combined preservice training and assessment (home studies) for prospective foster and adoptive parents, identifying them as resources for children in care and their birth families. In the 1990s, the *Parent Resources for Information, Development, Education (PRIDE) Model of Practice* continued that tradition.

Focusing on foster families instead of foster parents was promoted by the National Commission on Family Foster Care, convened in 1990 by the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). The Commission published *A Blueprint for Fostering Infants, Children, and Youth in the 1990s which:*

> (a) redefined family foster care as the 24-hour/day care of children by families that are recruited, assessed, selected, trained, and retained to protect and nurture vulnerable children and youth when their parents cannot

(b) recognized that it is through the strength of family and community living that the effects of loss and trauma are ameliorated, the capacity to develop positive relationships are built, and essential life skills are developed.

(c) respected the recommendations of youth in care to use strength-based words and expressions to describe their experiences, including replacing removed from parents with separated, using the example that "garbage and snow are removed."

*** U.S. Children's Bureau published "Finding and Keeping More Foster Parents" in its magazine, *Children Today* (pages 1-5, 36, March/April 1982).