Role of Resource Parents
in Supporting Family Recovery and Reunification in Family Treatment Drug Courts

With the prevalence of substance use disorders across the country, foster care agencies are strained to handle the increased number of children coming into protective custody. After years of a declining number of removals, the number of children placed in out-of-home care jumped 10 percent from 2012 to 2016, according to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Approximately 92,000 children were removed from their homes in fiscal year 2016 because at least one parent had a drug abuse issue, according to HHS.

Traditionally, the lack of coordination and collaboration across child welfare, substance use disorder treatment, and family or dependency drug court systems has hindered their ability to fully support these families, according to the 1999 report to Congress “Blending Perspectives and Building Common Ground.” These families have multiple and complex needs as a result of poly-substance use and co-occurring issues such as trauma, mental health disorders, unemployment, homelessness and domestic violence.

Consequently, parental substance use is associated with longer out-of-home placements for dependent children and higher rates of child maltreatment and termination of parental rights, according to a 2009 article in Children and Youth Services Review. To better meet the needs of these families, Family Treatment Drug Courts (FTDC) provide a collaborative solution of enhanced treatment and accountability.

Foster Parents as a Resource and a Valued Member of the Team

The FTDC model is based on a foundation of collaboration acknowledging that no single agency has the resources or expertise to effectively meet the needs of these families. As FTDC programs are expanding and strengthening their collaborative partnerships, foster parents are being recognized as valuable members of the team and the important role they can play...
in supporting the goals of family recovery
and reunification.

Foster parents are now referred to as
"resource parents" to reflect the critical
role they have in the lives of families
involved in the child welfare system. In
addition to providing for the needs of the
child, resource parents provide support
for the birth family as they seek to achieve
recovery, safety, stability and permanency.
Resource parents can be a valuable source
of information used for making important
decisions regarding the child and family.
Research has shown that the involvement
of resource parents is a critical factor
for successful reunification, according
to 2011 information from the Child
Welfare Information Gateway on family
reunification.

**Learn more as a family about addiction and brain disease**

Families affected by parental substance use
are some of the most challenging families to
serve in the child welfare system. They are
also the most misunderstood due to stigma
associated with the disease of addiction.
Some common misconceptions include:
- Addiction as a moral failure or character
flaw.
- The parents must love their drugs more
than their kids.
- Treatment will never work.
- They lack the willpower to become sober.

Research from the National Institute
on Drug Abuse about the brain science
of addiction, however, has dramatically
changed how substance use disorders are viewed, enabling systems to respond
effectively to the problem.

In that research, “Drugs, Brains, and
Behavior: The Science of Addiction,”
adoption is defined as a chronic, relapsing
brain disease that is characterized by
compulsive drug seeking and use, despite
harmful consequences.

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Addiction is similar to other diseases, such
as heart disease. Both disrupt the normal,
healthy functioning of the underlying organ,
have serious harmful consequences, but
can be successfully treated and managed
through treatment and recovery supports.

As resource parents learn more about
addiction, they will become better equipped
to work directly with birth parents with
less judgment and greater effectiveness
and understanding. Training can also
ensure that resource parents share common
principles and the same vision on how these
families can be supported.

Child welfare agencies and foster family
agencies can better prepare and support
resource parents by ensuring that informa-
ton about substance use disorders are part
of the recruitment, orientation and training
materials.

Learning more about addiction changes
the way we think and talk about families
affected by parental substance use disorders.
Language matters and being more mindful
of language decreases stigma and can have
an affirming effect when working with these
families.

**Embrace the challenges and opportunities of shared parenting**

One of the most significant challenges
for resource parents is co-parenting or
shared parenting. Shared parenting is
a practice in which resource parents
cultivate positive, supportive relationships
and open communication with birth

parents, according to a 2010 article in
North Carolina Division of Social Services’
Fostering Perspectives. Shared parenting
with birth parents with substance use
disorders can be particularly challenging
given the complexities related to the disease
and recovery. But the benefits achieved
through shared parenting are worth the
effort. Children are spared inherent conflict
between their parents and caregivers while
birth parents also benefit as they learn
positive parenting skills from the resource
parents. A shared parenting relationship
can also result in an ongoing supportive
relationship with the family after the child
returns home.

**Support and facilitate frequent and quality family time**

Resource parents have the opportunity to
build strong, positive connections with birth
parents by supporting frequent and quality
visits with their children. Children and
youth who have regular, frequent contact
with their families are more likely to reunify,
spend less time in out-of-home care, and
are less likely to re-enter foster care after
reunification, according to Dr. Gerald
Mallon’s “Visiting the heart of reunification.”
Research shows frequent visitation also
promotes healthy attachment and reduces
negative effects of separation, according to
the National Resource Center for Foster Care
and Permanency Planning.

Family time honors the parent-child relation-
ship and recognizes that families have
the need and the right to see each other.
Family time also provides an important
opportunity for parents to apply what they are learning in parent education programming. Through the observation of family time, partner agencies have opportunities to gather information about a parent's capacity to appropriately meet their child's needs, as well as the family's overall readiness for reunification.

**Closing**

Resource families have the most challenging and difficult work as they temporarily care for children during a difficult season of trauma, separation and loss. They should be seen as invaluable members of the collaborative team and recognized for their unique abilities and commitments.

Partner agencies should ensure that they receive the training, support services and resources needed to serve these children and families well. Child welfare agencies and child and family-serving programs that want to recruit, train and retain quality, well-trained caregivers to meet the growing foster care population should focus on integrating topics related to substance use disorders and how they can effectively support children and their families.

For more information, download a recently published technical assistance resource, "The Role of Foster Parents in Supporting Family Recovery and Reunification" by visiting www.cffutures.org.

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**Success in the Field**

*In Louisiana,* the Department of Children and Family Services, along with Judge Thomas Duplantier of the Lafayette Family Preservation Court (LFPC) developed the Foster Parenting Report which allows foster parents to be heard by the court without needing to appear and testify. The LFPC has also been intentional in their efforts to strengthen the relationships between birth parents and foster parents as well as foster parents and the court. The LFPC hosts a number of events throughout the year such as an Easter egg hunt, Christmas events and graduations which birth parents, foster parents and children are encouraged to attend.

The LFPC has seen incredible success in their efforts to build these positive relationships as noted by the LFPC coordinator, "We have had a handful of clients that have asked their foster parents to remain in their children's lives by becoming godparents?"

*The Milwaukee County Family Drug Treatment Court (FDTC)* in Wisconsin recognizes the importance of engaging foster parents in the process and having them be involved in key activities such as parenting time and family events. SaintA, one of the ongoing case management agencies for FDTC, has implemented the Fostering Relationships model which helps guide foster parent involvement during parenting time. The Milwaukee County FDTC is currently developing ways to engage caregivers in the process through education and outreach, including by previous caregivers and participants. For example, the FDTC is in the process of creating a video on the court process for foster parents.

*The Miami-Dade Dependency Drug Court (DDC)* in Florida holds icebreaker meetings between the birth parent and foster parent to learn more about the child(ren), to discuss the need to co-parent, and to assist with relationship-building. Icebreaker meetings are facilitated by the child welfare agency. Professionals such as the DDC specialist recognize the importance of strengthening relationships and the critical role resource parents have in co-parenting, "Foster parents love, care for and advocate for children's needs while their birth parents are given the respite to receive treatment, heal, build parenting skills, get well and until the children are able to return to a healthy and safe home with their birth parents."