



Strengthening Families & Communities

NEW TRAINING CURRICULUM

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New Training Curriculum

Foster parenting is different from parenting a child you have raised from birth. What those differences are and how foster parenting will impact the life of the foster family are core issues addressed in a comprehensive pre-service curriculum for foster parents developed over the past year.

The training guide reflects the vision of Raymond Torres, Casey Family Services' executive director, who has wanted the unique expertise of each division's training to be incorporated into a single package. Deputy Executive Director for Field Operations Ann Sullivan, who has helped develop curricula for national child welfare organizations, also advocated for a Casey product and both championed and guided the process of its creation.

Built out of experience gained over 26 years of training in divisions from Connecticut to Vermont, the new curriculum is being tested in divisions throughout Casey Family Services. The guide is the result of an intensive collaboration among social workers, foster parents, resource coordinators and other staff members. Through a work group that numbered 20 members, the process soon achieved a pace and scope that came as a welcome surprise to everyone who took part.

The group decided to focus on three things:

- Critical information about foster parenting and children who come into foster care;
- Learning that is both experiential and theoretical; and
- Providing tools and resources so prospective families can assess their ability to foster children.

“What we've developed is a unique set of core components to assist a prospective foster parent to make an informed commitment to fostering children,” says Casey Family Services Staff Development and Training Manager Mary Anne Judge. “When families come to us, often they are uncertain about whether they can do the work. These components represent what Casey Family Services wants every foster parent to know before they make a commitment. And they provide resources and exercises so that the prospective foster parents can experience what it's going to be like.”

The training components are presented in a guide for trainers and a resource book for parents. Components include:

- An Introduction to Foster Parenting
- Understanding the Importance of the Birth Families of Children in Foster Care
- Understanding Diversity
- Child and Youth Development
- Understanding the Children Who Come into Foster Care

- Understanding and Managing Children's Behaviors
- Roles and Responsibilities of Foster Families.

Each component offers experiential exercises and concludes with review questions.

"We knew that we could do 21 hours on any of the components – grief and loss, to name just one – but we had to keep reminding ourselves that this training should be an overview," comments Julie Skinner, Team Leader in the New Hampshire Division. "We could provide more knowledge and tools in later trainings."

This is not a prescriptive curriculum. It assumes that the social workers and staff administering the training have the experience, knowledge and ability to assess a group and select appropriate material for them. "The beauty in it is that there's enough leeway for people to be creative," Judge adds. "We may not all get there the same way, but we will have provided a blueprint for what we want people to know."

Consultant Madelyn Freundlich was the project facilitator. Her training in law (she is an attorney), social work (she's also a social worker), and facilitation (she is a child advocate) certainly proved an asset. "I reviewed all the training materials from each of the divisions," she says. "What that showed me was that there is richness and a sense out there of what needs to be done."

It was very helpful to have participation from foster parents, Freundlich adds. "When we were struggling, they were the voices of experience. Through them I learned a lot about specific issues that confront parents and how to deal with them," she adds.

"I thought back to the training that I received when I came to Casey 15 years ago," Gay Palazzo, a resource coordinator and former foster parent in the Vermont division. "What I remember best is what I learned first."

Palazzo incorporated parts of the new curriculum into a training held at the division last January and the reaction of staff was very positive. "They were able to work with it and felt comfortable in having clear goals and objectives to work with," she reports.

Massachusetts foster parent Marie Baldassarri agrees that the curriculum does a good job in preparing newcomers. "Fourteen years ago, I didn't know what to expect either," she says. She believes that the new Casey curriculum hits the main points that have been important to her.

"I think this curriculum is very distinctive," Freundlich offers. "With its evaluation piece, it will make a great contribution to the field. It is a well-organized approach to field training with clearly articulated questions following each session and strong exercises and audio visuals. It satisfies

state requirements and strongly supports nationally accepted social work practice.”

“We now have a guide that truly reflects the wisdom of the Casey experience,” Sullivan concludes. “It’s a good start, and we will ensure that it is a living document, always open to new learning and new ideas.”