

Together Facing the Challenge

*Program works
to support foster
parents, keep youth
connected to
biological families*



Photo courtesy of Maureen Murray, MSW
A foster parent and biological parent discussing their experience in shared parenting in a session with the author Maureen Murray.

Biological, foster and adoptive families often face many issues and challenges, and agencies work to support them. Together Facing the Challenge (TFTC) is an evidence-based training and coaching model developed to train agency staff working in foster care on the core elements embedded within this trauma-informed curriculum. This train-the-trainer model was designed to support agency staff in their role as coach to their foster parents. The tools and strategies are designed to assist families in building therapeutic relationships, implementing proactive treatment approaches, and promoting the importance of managing one's own stress by taking time on a routine basis for self-care. The TFTC team has worked with more than 50 agencies in over 20 states — we have had an opportunity to see issues that go beyond geographical boundaries, beyond rural versus urban, beyond private versus public agency.

Anyone involved in working with youth who are currently in out-of-home care or have previously resided in a placement

outside of their family can benefit from this information. Viewing youth through a different lens can provide caregivers with a heightened perspective of the multiple challenges youth face in defining “family” as they transition through the foster care experience. Supporting youth in care in developing their individual identity is critical and has great impact on their later ability to learn essential life skills, solve problems effectively, develop short and long-range goals, and most importantly claim a positive sense of self.

One of the critical roles caregivers play in parenting children in care has to do with the process of launching them into adulthood — an adulthood in which children's biological family often play an incredibly important role. Here we will explore the difficult emotional work faced by youth as they strive to build relationships with caregivers outside of their family, while maintaining a sense of loyalty and protectiveness to their biological family, and work through the issues of divided loyalty they may feel. Preparing to function

interdependently requires a sense of self in addition to a set of day-to-day life skills.

We now need to look at how the training techniques offered to foster parents or other out-of-home providers can also be used to help biological families develop new practices that will aid in the transition for youth who either return home or who will continue to have a relationship with their family of origin. Upon a successful completion of their stay in care, or upon their aging out of the system, foster youth may return to their biological family setting. They need to be able to integrate the cognitive gains, behavioral skills and life skills they have learned while in care to their permanent family. We hope to give caregivers an opportunity to both reflect on what they are already doing to assist youth in preparing for the future, while also providing them with a framework to be more intentional in finding opportunities to teach and coach the youth in their care.

Recently we asked a group of foster care agencies a few questions about how they view

their roles in working with the families to whom children will return post-placement. When asked about the frequency in which shared parenting is currently taking place within their agency, the following comment reflects many similar responses given to this question: "Shared parenting is typically encouraged but no structured or strategic plan is in place to ensure how or when, or the effectiveness of what takes place — nor does there appear to be much in the way of collecting data, measuring data or outcomes, in this realm."

We also asked agency staff to share what they are doing as a program to keep youth connected to their families, siblings and other relatives. Some of their responses included regularly scheduled visits and calls, creating or adding onto a youth's lifebook, encouraging attendance at the child's team meetings, helping with transportation, family therapy, including families in special events and activities, and sharing information about the child's progress and needs. The following are a few responses that included specific steps they are taking to strengthen the connection between the foster and birth families:

- Encourage foster parents to establish contact with birth families soon after placement begins.
- Have an open and supportive attitude with the birth family and be empathetic.
- Ask for photos of youth and family that can be displayed in the child's room.
- Identify favorite foods and recipes that can be included in meal planning.
- Find out about traditions and activities that have been an important part of the child's past that the foster family can adopt.

We wanted to know what barriers and challenges they faced in fully integrating shared parenting into practice. Many of the responses were all too familiar: transportation, distance, lack of follow-through, financial limitations, court orders, mental health, substance abuse, medical related issues and so on.

Too often the barriers appear to be overwhelming. This greatly hinders the agency's ability to successfully intervene. As we began asking both birth and foster parents to share with us some of the difficulties and supports they have encountered along the way, we have learned about key elements needed in successfully navigating through this process.

The themes that emerged from our interviews with both foster parents and birth parents included:

- Relationships, and the trust and respect they contain, take time to develop.
- Coaching takes time and practice.
- Understanding what's underlying the surface of youth's behaviors helps build a trusting partnership.
- Assessing the impact trauma has on behavior is key to building a safe and nurturing environment.
- Both biological families and other adult caregivers need to be open and receptive to new perspectives and strategies.

We believe relationships are key. Although this is one of the core values of *Together Facing the Challenge*, up until recently our model has solely focused on the relationships between agency staff and foster parents, and the relationships between foster parents and children in their care.

As we move forward, we will expand our model to offer an intentional focus on involving permanent caregivers from the start. Our goal is to keep youth connected to their families of origin while in care and work together with caregivers to provide coaching, education, training and support to assist them in the preparation and planning for reunification. We believe that providing families with the tools and strategies imbedded in our model, followed by on-going coaching and support, will lead to a decrease in frequency of children and youth returning to care after discharge.

When children and youth return home to a family that has not been adequately prepared for this transition, the likelihood for there to be a successful reunification is greatly reduced. In many ways we are setting both children and their permanent caregivers up for failure by not providing permanent caregivers with the parenting tools necessary to navigate this transition, while leaving children and youth vulnerable to yet another loss, often one of many they have previously experienced. Hence the negative cycle continues and everyone loses in the process, especially our children. We certainly have our work cut out for us as we move forward in our understanding of how to best meet the needs of our families while improving the long-term outcomes of our children and youth.

By learning more about what is currently taking place between agency staff, foster parents and permanent caregivers as well as what the barriers and challenges have been, we will develop a comprehensive program to more fully address the needs of families in transition.

Look for our next chapter, *Together Facing the Challenge – Returning Home* ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Maureen Murray, MSW, is assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University School of Medicine. Murray has more than 20 years of experience leading clinical research projects in community-based settings. As the training director for the therapeutic foster care in a system of care study, she was the primary developer of the Therapeutic Foster Care resource toolkit, "Together Facing the Challenge." She provides training and consultation on this model of care. She has also served as an individual therapist for children living in foster and congregate care settings specializing in trauma treatment, adjustment disorders and familial separation issues.