



The Together Facing the Challenge team would like to acknowledge **Alexander Youth Network** and **Turning Point Family Services** for becoming certified in the model as well as **Support, Inc.** and **Families First Support Services, LLC** for becoming recertified in TFTC.



**SAVE THE DATE!**

**TFTC CONFERENCE**

**October 9, 2020**

**Mebane, NC**

  
**THE DUKE ENDOWMENT**

# Together Facing the Challenge

**Fall Newsletter, 2019**

**An Evidence-Based Model offers training, coaching, and ongoing support to our agency partners**



Pictured: Support, Inc. in Charlotte, NC

We are very excited to be able to continue our work with agencies using the *Together Facing the Challenge* model. By providing this training to their foster parents, while simultaneously integrating *TFTC* coaching into practice, providers are able to directly apply the training in their work with children and teens. Regularly scheduled in-home sessions held between foster parents and agency workers assist in applying the general skills learned during formal training sessions to the specific situations they face at home. It is this move from the general to the specific that helps families reinforce children's successes. It also allows for the development of effective interventions to address challenging behaviors they encounter in their role as caring adults for children with complex needs, at the same time keeping those interventions trauma informed in order to help children with their natural healing process. Working in partnership helps ensure children not only receive the best possible care while in placement, it also provides the foundation to promote better outcomes both in care and upon return to their permanent home.

It has been a real joy to expand our work to include agencies providing family foster care within the Department of Social Services. We continue reaching out to these child welfare agencies, offering them information about our program and scheduling in-person site meetings to provide more of an in-depth overview of TFTC. We recently began working with Duplin County DSS and have several additional site visits scheduled with other counties. There are numerous other agencies interested in learning more about the program. The responses we have received to our initial inquiries about their interest in our program have been positively met within the child welfare community.

We are also looking forward to piloting our "Closing the Circle" curriculum beginning in January 2020. This program works with agencies, resource parents, and primary parents together to help create a smooth move to permanency for children returning to the home of their primary parent. We greatly thank the New Bern office of Easterseals UCP for partnering with us on this initiative!

—Maureen Murray, Director

## **The Problem with Problem Behavior**

Allen Murray

As I spend time working with foster care agencies there seems to be a frequent conversation we have, a conversation about the tension between directly intervening with a child's difficult behavior and/or taking a trauma-informed approach to their behavioral difficulties. Some folks see these two things as incompatible, others see them as different sides of the same coin.

Sometimes I try to help agencies see that a child's behavior can fall into one of three different categories. Certainly, we work with children who have behavioral health difficulties, often which are outgrowths of their own emotional disturbance. For these children behavior change is part of a long process of not just changing the behavior, but also of dealing with the underlying emotional disturbance (please, please, please, let's not use the term psychopathology). Treatment plans and well-thought-out behavioral interventions are the order of the day here.

Other children may have behaviors that are a sign of their inability to process their own trauma. Whether the abuse was physical, sexual, or emotional, the human brain and spirit can be overwhelmed by trauma. We know of the classic "fight or flight" response (more accurately, fight, flight, or freeze response) that people engage in when startled, overwhelmed, or traumatized. And while certainly many children freeze or become unengaged with others due to their trauma histories, other children move toward the "fight" response, and show us their trauma histories through their behavior.

But there is a third cause for some children's behavior. These children suffer from an often misunderstood syndrome called POF-NKM (plain old-fashioned normal kid misbehavior). Children misbehave. It is normal. And actually, it is healthy. Children learn how the world operates by testing limits. They learn parental boundaries by creeping right up to the edge of the rule and then breaking it in order to see what happens. Children become their own individuals (instead of extensions of their parents) by individuating – doing things that set them apart as "their own person" – and the way they do that is to listen to music, choose their fashions, and wear their hair (among other things) in ways their parents don't like or approve of. It is their job. And providing guidance for behavior, while not becoming overly

alarmed by it or, to use a highly technical term, "squashing" it, is our job as parents (whether birth, foster, adoptive or whatever kind of parents we are).

When dealing with children with complex histories it is important that we do the hard work of differentiating behavior that is a sign of trauma from behavior that is a sign of emotional disturbance. But it is also important that we understand that some problematic behavior is simply normal. We need to treat it as normal, with a gentle correction, some teaching of the desired behavior, a smile, and a memory of when we did those same silly things. It is important that we recognize clinical symptoms and make plans for them. It is important that we recognize trauma-based behaviors and support children through them. But it is also important that we recognize that sometimes kids are just being kids, and keeping our own perspective and sense of humor is very important.



"I lied and said I was busy.  
I was busy;  
but not in a way most people understand.

I was busy taking deeper breaths.  
I was busy silencing irrational thoughts.  
I was busy calming a racing heart.  
I was busy telling myself I am okay.

Sometimes, this is my busy -  
and I will not apologize for it."

— Brittin Oakman



## **My TFTC Journey So Far**

Ashley Moore, Stokes County DSS



Stokes County DSS: Kim Clayton (left), Rebecca Maser, (center), Ashley Moore (right)

### **What was your experience like and what did you learn participating in the initial 3-day TFTC training?**

The initial 3-day TFTC training created an opportunity for me to present myself as a figure of unity between the agency and foster parents while simultaneously deepening my knowledge of trauma informed care. On the first day we were presented with the core components of TFTC, all of which resonated deeply with me. I immediately found belief - and relief - in TFTC and how beneficial this model is. This model teaches from the ground up, breaking down situations that arise in foster homes across the country and providing positive options for whole youth development. Finding the path to our youth's trauma recovery is not an easy one and is unique for each youth. First-hand experience as foster parents and the training TFTC provides shines a light on the prosperous future for our youth. It was reassuring to hear our social workers express their thoughts regarding the therapeutic help they could provide our local foster families, not just our youth! Everyone working together and completing the same training that I would be associated with created a real team connection.

### **What has your experience been like and what have you learned implementing the TFTC skills and strategies in your home?**

I began putting the model in motion by the second day of training. I had realized, that as an adult and parent, I had more control over situations and outcomes than I let myself have. The ability for me to stop myself from reacting immediately, providing a cool down period for the youth and myself, then engaging in a positive re-energizing conversation with youth was empowering. I

provide a safe, trusting and transparent environment for our adolescent youth that gives them structure and choices, which is crucial for them to successfully transition to adulthood. I have developed behavior contracts that have been implemented with teenage youth in my home. Contracts create clear boundaries and consequences, and allow teachable moments to help youth accept responsibility for their behavior. Behavior contracts work! I took inspiring information from TFTC, but the most important thing I found throughout this experience was that I, as a foster mother, would need to open my mind and heart to change, in support of the youth in my home.

### **What has your experience been like and what you have learned by co-leading the TFTC training for other foster parents?**

Conducting TFTC for other foster parents has been an eye-opening experience. I have found with each session that more and more foster parents would open up to me about issues in their own homes and ask for advice/ways I would navigate them. I have found that having a foster parent present this information to other foster parents increases the interactivity of the group and creates a more relaxed atmosphere than just the agency staff facilitating the training. With each group of foster parents I speak to I break the ice by explaining that "I am you." I am the foster parent sitting in the audience, I am the foster parent feeling the hurt and anguish from a broken system, I am the foster parent looking into the eyes of the children in my home when, yet again, their world has been torn apart, feeling the sting of all foster children, all over the country, suffering. TFTC has empowered my advocacy for human rights and the dire need to initiate the uncomfortable conversations preventing our youth from properly developing their own unique individual identities. I send my sincere gratitude to Maureen and Tom for bringing me on this journey to a better, brighter future for our youth.

## **Self-Care Corner**

Self care is one of the hallmarks of TFTC, thus we found it fitting to have a recurring self-care corner in our Newsletter. For this edition, staff and foster parents from several partner agencies have shared some of their strategies for taking care of self:

**“Staff memberships to Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens, monthly staff meet ups to socialize after work, Support Inc. “So You Think You Can Cook” night, Staff karaoke night” – Emily McGuire, Support Incorporated**

### Self-Care Corner (cont.)

“One small thing we do as a group is go to lunch most Tuesdays after we have our weekly group supervision. We discuss so many deep topics that we have lunch specifically on Tuesdays as a way to unwind. **We are all responsible for this.**” – Kenyada Maye, Integrated Family Services



“I take long baths as soon as the kids go to bed. I don’t talk to my husband, or any other family or friends. **I just sit in the warm, bubbly water and soak away my stress.**” – Anonymous foster parent

“I take a ‘technology break’ where I don’t look at social media, TV, or my computer. I make my whole family do the same thing. **We all need to unplug sometimes.**” – anonymous

“Use your phone alarm – **set it for regular breathing time**, or walking time, or laughing time when you look at funny pet videos or something” – staff person at KidsPeace NC

“**Travel to the local airport and watch the planes come in and leave.** At RDU there is a sunny open play place for your children and picnic tables to have lunch while watching.” – Nikki Ballentine, Children’s Home Society of NC

### Re-Engaging Families with Families

Malinda Pritchett, The Bair Foundation

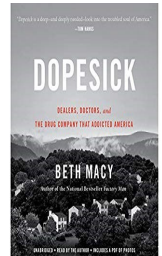
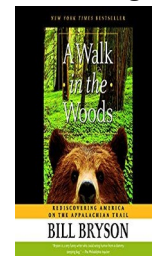
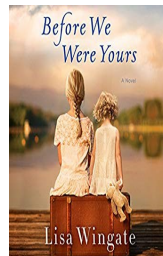
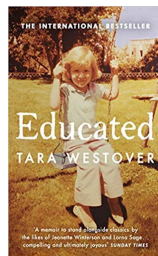
We were seeing a decrease in attendance at our monthly foster parent trainings, and seasoned families were desiring fresh material. We train on a weeknight once a month and parents are accustomed to two agency workers co-facilitating. About a year into our work with Together Facing the Challenge we began having a foster parent co-facilitate the program. The dynamic of our monthly trainings shifted and we saw an increase in foster parent participation.

Our co-facilitator, Michelle, wears many hats in her home. She is an adoptive mom, a biological mom, and a foster mom. She and her husband have welcomed 15 children in their home during the past year, ranging from a single night of respite to forever families. Michelle believes in TFTC, and her passion shines when she leads sessions. Her stories are authentic, and families quickly see themselves in those stories. She provides multiple perspectives from her variety of placements and experiences. It adds a freshness to the material presented by the treatment coordinators and thus we quickly gain the attention and confidence of our foster parents. Treatment coordinators can clarify policies while the foster parent can provide an example of day to day application of those policies. This collaboration on training concepts got our families re-engaged in training.

It is powerful having TFTC co-facilitated by an engaging and passionate foster parent. Agency workers don’t have the same experiences as foster parents and vice-versa. Making this change has improved the way our training program is facilitated. Introducing real examples of this program in day-to-day use, and hearing about the impact it has on our kids and families from both perspectives is powerful and extremely beneficial.

I hope that agencies that haven’t experienced a foster parent co-facilitator will consider it. A highly trained agency worker partnered with a highly passionate and committed foster parent will enable your families to understand the nuts and bolts of using TFTC, and will better support positive outcomes for all youth in care, which is our ultimate goal.

Here are some of the things that the TFTC team are reading for self-care:



*From the Together Facing the Challenge Team!*