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May/June 2012

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# The Quality Parenting Initiative

*Fostering in the 21st Century*

In 2004, foster care in Florida was in crisis. Children were sleeping in offices and conference rooms or moving from one home to another every 24 hours. Foster homes were over-capacity and urged to take even more children. Shelters were turned into placements and assessment centers were turned into shelters.

The Youth Law Center with the clinical program at Florida State University brought suit against the State of Florida and the Tallahassee child welfare agency to stop the abusive practice of having special needs teens sleep in the conference room of the Department of Children and Families. By 2007, that case was settled and the administration had changed. The new Secretary of Department of Children and Families, Bob Butterworth, met with the Youth Law Center and Jane Soltis of the Tampa-based Eckerd Family Foundation to discuss solutions to the problem. From that meeting the Quality Parenting Initiative, or QPI, was born.

Now almost five years and two secretaries later, QPI is a way of life in Florida and has been adopted by 18 counties in California. In Florida in particular, QPI represents a culture shift in the way that foster families work with other professionals as well as in the responsibilities foster families are expected and allowed to assume.

The principles behind QPI were simple.

- Foster parenting is a brand which creates a clear image and set of expectations in people's minds. That brand is neither positive nor reflective of reality.
- The negative connotations of the brand make recruitment and even retention difficult.
- To change the brand all participants in a child welfare system have to agree on what foster parents are expected to do and what they can expect from the foster parenting experience.
- This agreement should be summarized in a short, clear "brand statement" that can be easily shared.

- Once there is agreement, the system must change to be sure it supports those expectations rather than undermining them.
  - These changes should be identified and implemented by the people whom they affect — foster parents, investigators, case managers, licensing workers, court staff and even, if possible youth and parents rather than only by administrators who, for all good intentions are removed from the process.
  - The initial changes should be made as quickly as possible so that participants see results.
  - Change is a continuous process.
  - Only after substantial practice changes are accomplished can meaningful recruitment occur.
- Unlike other initiatives, for better or worse, QPI did not prescribe a specific set of expectations or brand, nor did we suggest specific practice changes. The local child welfare community makes all of these decisions. Nevertheless, all of the QPI sites have identified similar characteristics of

excellent parenting. The brand statements, while quite different in style share common elements:

Excellent foster parents:

- Are respected partners with the other members of the child welfare team
- Love, nurture and advocate for children in their care and
- Support and mentor birth families including siblings and other kin as well as birth parents.

To see all of the brand statements go to [www.qpiflorida.com](http://www.qpiflorida.com).

Changes in policy and practice range from the small details of social worker — foster parent interaction to major policy shifts. For example:

- In many areas foster parents were frustrated by calls that weren't returned, voicemail boxes that were full and supervisors who seemed inaccessible. These communities have required that all voice mail boxes be cleared out regularly and developed a standard message saying "If I do not return your call within 24 hours or in time to help you, please call my supervisor at xxx-xxxx." The simple change from "you can call my supervisor" to "please call" gave foster parents permission to go to the next level without fear of alienating caseworkers. Now, several sites have gone farther and are having foster parents and case managers provide each other with phone numbers, emails, supervisors' information, preferred method of communicating and schedules at the first visit. This saves time and frustration for everyone and allows each person to get a glimpse into the other's life.
- Caseworkers and foster parents don't have a chance to get to know each other or understand the pressures that each faces. Several sites have hosted QPI kickoffs for staff and foster parents that include games and other social activities. At one, a foster parent and a caseworker each read "a day in my life." Participants were

moved to tears by the thought of how much responsibility each partner faced. At others, foster parents recognize a case manager who has been an outstanding partner while case managers recognize a foster parent. Both receive congratulatory letters from top administration and one has even been featured on the local news.

- Foster parents feel frustrated when they are asked to care for a child and work with his or her parents, but told that all case information is confidential and won't be shared. In Florida and California, legal opinions provided to foster parents and agency staff clearly explain that almost all information can be shared with a foster parent. These opinions gave foster parents access to the records they needed while alleviating case managers' fears of invading families' legally protected privacy.
- Across the country children in foster care are arbitrarily prohibited from participating in "normal" activities for fear of regulations or liability. In Florida, the current Secretary, David Wilkins, had his staff review these regulations to explode urban myths and give foster families more freedom to include these children in their families' plans. See [www.qpiflorida.com](http://www.qpiflorida.com) for the Secretary's memo.
- Foster parents get many hours of training before they are licensed, but limited training, when they most need it, after children are placed in their homes. Florida QPI developed a site that provides live web-based training to foster parents when they request it and that broadcasts local trainings throughout the state. Because foster parents are the best teachers of other foster parents, the site has many video clips of foster parents explaining how they meet common challenges like making a new child welcome or working with birth parents.

#### QPI FAMILIES

Secretary Wilkins and his wife Tanya, have

embraced the QPI principles whole heartedly. In addition to the Secretary's policy changes, Tanya Wilkins is chairing a campaign to bring statewide attention to the new brand. A partnership between Department of Children and Families and the Community Based Care Agencies, assisted by the Youth Law Center and the Eckerd Foundation, the campaign encourages the whole community to work together to support outstanding parenting for children in out of home care.

We are lucky that George Sheldon, who, as Department of Children and Families Deputy for Operations and then Secretary championed the creation of QPI is now the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Administration for Children and Families in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He has consistently been supportive of the movement to recognize foster families as full professional partners in the child welfare system.

These are just a few of the dozens of innovations developed and implemented by QPI teams or at their suggestion. QPI shows that equal and respectful partnership among state and local child welfare, foster parents, advocates, and youth and families can change the lives of children.

For more information, visit [www.qpiflorida.com](http://www.qpiflorida.com) or contact Carole Shauffer at [Cshauffer@ylc.org](mailto:Cshauffer@ylc.org) or Mamie Yee at [Myee@ylc.org](mailto:Myee@ylc.org).

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