Teamwork – It Takes Two to Tango

Bridge Resource Family Guiding Principle #5 says, “We effectively communicate through teamwork, which yields the best results for children and families.” The virtues of teamwork in information-sharing and decision-making is not hard to understand, but sometimes teamwork can feel like an endangered species in the world of child welfare.

It’s not uncommon to hear, in a gathering of resource parents, at least one grumbling about their worker. She or he “doesn’t return my calls, doesn’t tell me what I need to know, or help me with finding resources, or understand how hard it is to care for these kids and then let them go.” Any of these experiences can be frustrating and leave us feeling like the whole concept of teamwork is just a mirage that vanishes as real life intrudes on the scene.

But this summer, several overseas military families who were hoping to adopt a child from Oklahoma had nothing but praise for an OKDHS Adoption Specialist in Shawnee, Robin Gibson. These families’ nomination of Kathryn Gibson (no relation to Robin) is “always there, 24/7.”

Linda Kay says that she can count on getting a call back from Kathryn, even at night or on the weekend. Once, Linda had just welcomed a new child into her home, and discovered what might be evidence of abuse. Kathryn drove back right away, took the child for an immediate medical examination in Tulsa, then brought her back to the Smiths as they tried to support their child’s birth parents toward reunification.

In the eyes of the Smiths, Kathryn works “above and beyond” her job description. The Bridge resource family’s role of mentoring birth parents is a standard expectation now, but Linda Kay says that Kathryn provided special encouragement and guidance to the Smiths as they tried to support their child’s birth parents toward reunification. All in all, “she’s a wonderful person.”

Kathryn works “above and beyond” her job description, but still not convince their customers or clients that their heart is in their job. Robin’s heart is in her job, and it shows. And her resource parents respond with praise and appreciation. That expression of appreciation, Robin says, just inspires her to work harder.

Linda Kay and John Smith, Nowata, have been resource parents for more than three years. Throughout those years, the Smiths have been so grateful that Kathryn Gibson, an OKDHS “comprehensive worker,” has been “their partner” in helping children. Kathryn (no relation to Robin) is “always there, 24/7.”

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In every instance, when a conscientious worker joins hands with a dedicated resource parent, teamwork flourishes. The dance of mutual respect and attentive listening, to the tune of job description, but still not convince their customers or clients that their heart is in their job. Robin’s heart is in her job, and it shows. And her resource parents respond with praise and appreciation. That expression of appreciation, Robin says, just inspires her to work harder.

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In every instance, when a conscientious worker joins hands with a dedicated resource parent, teamwork flourishes. The dance of mutual respect and attentive listening, to the tune of
Don’t Wait to Appreciate!

As Robin said, recognition for one’s efforts is often inspiration for even greater effort. If you know of an OKDHS child welfare worker who works “above and beyond” their job description, who makes you feel like you are a partner on their team, please send a short e-mail to Sherri, sfinik@ou.edu or call (918) 660-3724.

Your worker can then join Robin and Kathryn in the “Above and Beyond Club” in the next OKDHS Connections edition. Don’t wait to appreciate! Send your e-mail today!

Upcoming Events

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Auditence: Approved OKDHS adoptive families
Location: Broken Arrow, OK
Date: Saturday, October 24
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Photo Exhibit: Seventy-five children were photographed by members of the Tulsa Photo Group and other photographers, and their photos will travel across the state for the next year. The Waiting Child Heart Gallery will be exhibited at Battle Creek Church in Broken Arrow, Oct. 16-30; Greenwood Cultural Center, Tulsa, Nov. 1-30; and Woodland Hill Mall, Tulsa, Dec. 1-31.

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This event celebrates those families, individuals and community partners who have been advocates for adoptive children. The event will kick off with a proclamation from the governor, a word from OKDHS Director Howard Hendricks and awards for special adoption advocates. Children and families will be treated to cake, punch and goodie bags.

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join.ok.gov
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Understand if they pull away.
Despite your best efforts, a young person may simply withdraw during the foster care period. This detachment may be their coping mechanism for emotional overload. Be sure to allow your young person some private “downtime” if they need it, and one-on-one time with you to talk through what they are feeling during this confusing time of year.

You might be a resource parent if . . .

- A night on the town consists of pushing three grocery carts - one full of kids and diaper bags, and two others for groceries.
- Your attic has 32 containers for grocery bags, two others for groceries.
- Your passenger van.

Call youth who formerly lived with you.
The holidays can be a particularly tough time for youth who have recently aged out of foster care. They may not have people to visit or a place to go for the holidays. In addition, young people commonly struggle financially when they first leave foster care. A phone call, card or small gift may lift their spirits and signal that you continue to care for them and treasure their friendship.

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For information about post-adoption services and resources, dealing with behavioral crises, planning good nutrition for your family, and responding effectively to burn-out. Inspiration, information, support, networking and door prizes!

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Spotlight on Support Groups

Bette Stevenson, a Foster Care Specialist in Muskogee County, wants her resource families to have a support group. “I worry that some of my resource families are frustrated,” she says. “They need the opportunity to ask questions of other resource families, and they need to feel the support that only other resource families – people who are walking the same path - can give them.” Squeezed in between her other responsibilities, Bette has been interviewing resource families, one at a time, about the kinds of support they feel they are missing, and the ways that those needs can be met when their workers aren’t able to call back right away, or just don’t have an answer to important questions. Bette’s next step is to meet new people in a more relaxed atmosphere. If that’s not practical, make a list of names of people, and their connection to you so that your young person can feel more prepared.

Have extra presents ready to help offset differences.

Your relatives might not purchase presents for your young person, so be prepared with other small gifts if you need “back-ups.” Extra gifts may be addressed “From Santa.” Children often keep count of the number of gifts received and use it to compare with other kids, so sometimes quantity is important.

Facilitate visits/contact with significant people.

Don’t allow your busy holiday hustle and bustle to keep you from arranging visits with your foster child’s extended family or friends, when appropriate. Even a phone call or a card to friends from the old neighborhood may be very important to your young person, but you may need to help in finding contact information.

Help them make sure their loved ones are okay.

A foster child may feel guilty if he is living in a warm home with holiday food and gifts, and may worry about his family members struggling through the holiday period. Continued from Thinking Ahead page 4

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Evaluational & Training Opportunities

Caring for a Child with Disabilities?
The Oklahoma Parents Center, headquartered in Holdenville, provides statewide parent training and information to support their mission of helping families, professionals and consumers to meet the needs of children and youth, birth through age 26, who are coping with disabilities. The Center provides:

- Training on a variety of topics related to children with disabilities
- Community IEP partner training and matching
- “Count Me In” disability awareness programs

Information and referral
- Special education help-line
- Statewide conference
- Quarterly newsletter

Free online courses include the six-hour “Partners in Education” and a three-hour “Making Your Case.” Check with your Resource or Adoption Specialist to determine if you can receive in-service training credit for these online courses.

Continued on page 7

OKDHS Director Howard Hendrick will make opening remarks on Tuesday, Oct. 20, and noted the Foster Care Association of Oklahoma would like to support local resource parent associations. For more information about becoming a member or serving on the board of FC Association of Oklahoma visit www.fc.org

Educational & Training Opportunities

GRANDfamilies Conference - Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

A free conference for grandparents and other relatives who are raising their grandchildren, providing resources to help families cope with stress and challenges. Location: Oklahoma City New Covenant Christian Church, 12000 N. Rockwell Date: October 20-21, 2009 Free child care available with advanced registration. OKDHS Director Howard Hendrick will make opening remarks on Tuesday, Oct. 20, and noted
Prepare:

- The needs of children and families.
- Martin addressed the various language and cultural barriers between government and faith communities especially as it relates to their differing missions. Guidance and creative ideas were presented on how to engage faith communities and address the potential conflicts.

TOP TEN

Tips for Helping Children Identify and Cope with Trauma Reminders

- Children who have experienced trauma such as neglect, physical abuse or sexual abuse may face so many reminders of their traumatic experiences in the course of an ordinary day that the whole world seems dangerous, and no one seems trustworthy. Resource parents are in a unique position to help these children regain a sense of safety, and begin to trust those adults who are trying to help them.

- Here are a few tips for resource parents to help children and young people regain a feeling of safety after traumatic experiences:

1. Understand that a “trauma reminder” may be sights, sounds, places, smells, specific people, times of the day, situations or even feelings that cause upsetting thoughts or emotions about what has happened in the past. Creating intense fear that the “bad thing” is about to happen again.

2. Learn as many specifics as possible about what the child has experienced so that you can be aware when a child is reacting to a trauma reminder. Look for patterns (time of day, month, season, activity, location, sounds, sights, smells, etc.) when a child’s reactions are exaggerated or inappropriate for the situation. Help the child to recognize these trauma reminders. Sometimes just realizing where a feeling came from can help to minimize its intensity.

3. Do not force the child into upsetting thoughts or reactions. Deep breathing, meditation, talking about their fears, or other techniques may help a child manage emotional or physical reactions to reminders.

4. Recognize the seriousness of what the child went through, and empathize with his or her feelings. Don’t be surprised or impatient if the child continues to react to reminders for a long time after the past experiences. Reacting doesn’t mean that a child is out-of-control, crazy or weak. Shame about reactions can make the experience worse.

5. When a child is reacting to a reminder, help the child understand the difference between the past experience and this present one. Cautiously point out all the ways in which the current situation is safer or non-threatening.

6. Provide tools to manage emotional and physical reactions. Deep breathing, meditation, talking about their fears, or other techniques may help a child manage emotional or physical reactions to reminders.

7. Seek professional help if the child’s distress is extreme, or if the child’s avoidance of trauma reminders is seriously limiting your child’s life or development.

8. Be self-aware. A child’s reaction to a trauma reminder may serve to remind you of something bad that happened in your own past. Work to separate your own reactions from those of the child.

9. Adapted from the Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit. www.NCTSN.org

10. Anticipate that anniversaries of events, holidays and birthdays may serve as reminders. With the child, identify ways that you can best reassure and help during a trauma reminder. Maybe the child might be comforted by a lack of support, a reassurance of safety, a physical gesture, or help in understanding the difference between the past and the present.

Thinking Ahead to the Holidays

Even though at this writing the trees are only hinting at their fall colors, we know that the time between the beginning of school and the holiday season seems to grow shorter every year.

Although the routine challenges of the holiday season can be quite demanding sometimes, resource parents need to be particularly mindful of the impact of the holidays on children who have lived with abuse and neglect and are now separated from their biological parents. Here are some ways to help your foster children prepare:

- Have a discussion with the young person about your family’s holiday customs.
- Do you celebrate over several days, or is there one main celebration? Are there religious customs? What are the expectations about gifts? Will there be visitors to the home? Will they be taken on visits to the homes of family or friends of the resource parents? Knowing what to expect will help decrease anxiety. Avoid surprises and you will decrease seasonal tensions.

- Prepare friends and family before you visit.
- Let people know in advance about your foster children. Your preparation will cut down on awkward questions, and prevent your foster child from feeling like an “imposition” on your family’s traditions.

- Remember confidentiality.
- Discuss with your young person how they would like to be introduced and what is appropriate to share about their history with your family and friends.

- Arrange meeting your family in advance, if possible.
- If possible, arrange a casual meeting in advance of the “main events” so that your foster child can

Continued on page 6
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3. Do not force the child into situations that seem to cause unbearable distress.

4. Allow the child to avoid the most intense reminders until he or she feels safe and trusts you to help.

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Bettie is prepared to offer the location and information to support their efforts as well. The Oklahoma Children’s Services (OKCYS) works with Oklahoma resource parents who are raising children with disabilities. The OKCYS vision is to foster parent involvement and leadership, while providing training and other resources to help families cope with stress and challenges. Location: Oklahoma City New Covenant Christian Church, 12000 N. Rockwell Date: October 20-21, 2009 Free child care available with advanced registration. OKDHS Director Howard Hendrick will make opening remarks on Tuesday, Oct. 20, and noted that... An important opportunity to learn more about the services of the Oklahoma Parent Center, visit their Web site at oklahomaparentscenter.org or call (877) 555-4332.

Continued from Thinking Ahead page 4

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Continued on page 7

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Understanding and encouraging young people?

Understand and encourage your young person's traditions and beliefs. Incorporate traditions that are important to the youth in your own celebrations. Allow young people to purchase small gifts for their relatives or friends, or help them craft handmade gifts. Understand if they pull away. Despite your best efforts, a young person may simply withdraw during the holidays. This detachment may be their coping mechanism for emotional overload. Be sure to allow your young person some private “downtime” if they need it, and one-on-one time with you to talk through what they are feeling during this confusing time of year.

Call youth who formerly lived with you.
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• A night on the town consists of pushing three grocery carts - one full of kids and diaper bags, and two others for groceries.
• Your attic has 32 containers with ages 1-16 listed on each.
• Your vehicle can transport more than two others for groceries.

Adoptive Parent Training Conference

Audience: OKDHS and Tribal adoptive parents
Location: Embassy Suites 3332 S. 79th E. Ave. Tulsa
Date: Saturday, November 7
Time: 10 am – 4 pm
Great information about post-adoption services and resources, dealing with behavioral crises, planning good nutrition for your family, and responding effectively to burn-out. Inspiration, information, support, networking and door prizes!

For information about registration, contact Mika at (918) 660-3729 or your Adoption Specialist. Approved for six in-service training credits for full-day attendance.

National Foster Parent Association 40th Annual Education Conference
Location: Baltimore, MD
Dates: May 29 – June 2, 2010
For more information, visit www.nfpainc.org

Tips and positive parenting

In foster care, grieving can be experienced by everyone involved – the birth parents, the child, the foster parents, and member of the foster family. Learn tools for regaining a sense of balance and acceptance after a separation.

Online course on “Grief & Loss in the Care System”
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Understand if they pull away. Despite your best efforts, a young person may simply withdraw during the holidays. This detachment may be their coping mechanism for emotional overload. Be sure to allow your young person some private “downtime” if they need it, and one-on-one time with you to talk through what they are feeling during this confusing time of year.

Call youth who formerly lived with you.
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Teamwork – It Takes Two to Tango

Bridge Resource Family Guiding Principle #5 says, “We effectively communicate through teamwork, which yields the best results for children and families.” The virtues of teamwork in information-sharing and decision-making is not hard to understand, but sometimes teamwork can feel like an endangered species in the world of child welfare.

It’s not uncommon to hear, in a gathering of resource parents, at least one grumbling about their worker. She or he “doesn’t return my calls, doesn’t tell me what I need to know, or help me with finding resources, or understand how hard it is to care for these kids and then let them go.” Any of these experiences can be frustrating and leave us feeling like the whole concept of teamwork is just a mirage that vanishes as real life intrudes on the scene.

But this summer, several overseas military families who were hoping to adopt a child from Oklahoma had nothing but praise for an OKDHS Adoption Specialist in Shawnee, Robin Gibson. These families’ nomination earned Robin the honor of Caseworker of the Month with Adopt Us Kids, a federal program to recruit and connect foster and adoptive families with waiting children throughout the United States. (See www.adoptuskids.org/ResourceCenter/partner/Support/CaseworkerStories/robinGibson)

Robin’s reaction after the surprise of such an honor was, “But I was just doing my job!” Many people, whether they work at OKDHS or elsewhere, can fulfill the specific duties listed on their job description, but still not convince their customers or clients that their heart is in their job. Robin’s heart is in her job, and it shows. And her resource parents respond with praise and appreciation.

That expression of appreciation, Robin says, just inspires her to work harder.

Linda Kay and John Smith, Nowata, have been resource parents for more than three years. Throughout those years, the Smiths have been so grateful that Kathryn Gibson, an OKDHS “comprehensive worker,” has been “their partner” in helping children.

Kathryn (no relation to Robin) is “always there, 24/7.” Linda Kay says that she can count on getting a call back from Kathryn, even at night or on the weekend. Once, Linda had just welcomed a new child into her home, and discovered what might be evidence of abuse. Kathryn drove back to Tulsa, then brought her back to the Smiths that evening.

In the eyes of the Smiths, Kathryn works “above and beyond” her job description. The Bridge resource parent’s role of mentoring birth parents is a standard expectation now, but Linda Kay says that Kathryn provided special encouragement and guidance to the Smiths as they tried to support their child’s birth parents toward reunification.

In every instance, when a child welfare worker shares a successful outcome, we can easily assume the worker is on top of their game, and that they have received the tools to do their job. But in the case of Kathryn, there was very little in the way of “tools” to bridge the sometimes distant, complicated world of birth parents and adoptive families.

Linda Kay says, just inspires her to work harder.

The Smiths have described Kathryn’s role as “a dedicated resource parent, teamwork flourisher, disaster resolver, and all around hero.”

“Represent” - a magazine written by teens, the “voice of youth in care”. www.youthcomm.org

Foster Parent Association of Oklahoma Join with FCAD to support their ongoing “Supplies for Success” program, to donate school supplies for foster children. Contact Chris Weidenmaier at wfam4kids@aol.com or visit www.fcado.org

Foster Parent College www.fosterparentcollege.com Online training for resource parents. To register for twelve hours of free online training, go first to www.nrcys.org and then let them go.” Any of these experiences can be frustrating and leave us feeling like the whole concept of teamwork is just a mirage that vanishes as real life intrudes on the scene.

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In every instance, when a conscientious worker joins hands with a dedicated resource parent, teamwork flourishes. The dance of mutual respect and attentive listening, to the tune of