May is National Foster Care Month

This May, individuals, organizations and communities are asked to come forward and support a child in foster care in any way they can. National Foster Care Month draws public attention to the year-round needs of over half a million youth who are not living at home because their own families are unable to care for them.

If your community is organizing a National Foster Care Month event, support it. If not, consider organizing an event yourself. And while you’re at it, congratulate yourself and all your resource parent friends and colleagues on the invaluable service that they provide to children and our community.

For great ideas, visit www.fostercaremonth.org.

Foster Care Association of Oklahoma’s Back-to-School Campaign

Foster Care Association of Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting children and strengthening families, has begun a statewide campaign to fundraise and solicit school supplies for children ages 5 to 18, and monetary gifts. Currently, the greatest need is full-sized backpacks for youth in care. Other needed supplies include:

- Notebooks
- Manuscript notebooks
- Markers
- Scissors
- Glue
- Glue sticks
- Facial tissue
- Lunchboxes
- Erasers
- Gift cards

For more information about how to help, contact Lana Freeman, president, at 405-387-5052, lanaF@pldi.net or Sandy Brown, treasurerconference chair at 405-342-5570, browns@safy.org.

All cash contributions are tax-deductible.
You Can Change the World for One Child

The Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives and OKDHS co-hosted Fostering Hope for Children community gatherings in Durant and Bartlesville in February. With the theme “You may not be able to change the world, but you can change the world for one child,” the events were designed to educate and engage the communities in foster care service opportunities.

During the month of May, OFBCI will launch a state-wide promotional campaign, primarily through the faith media, to encourage and recruit communities, congregations and individuals to become involved in foster care activities. Faith congregations throughout Oklahoma are being encouraged to designate the Sunday before Memorial Day, May 15, as Fostering Hope Sunday. Congregations might make an announcement about the local need for foster parents, or invite a foster parent to speak about their personal experience, or organize a recruitment project. The goal is to transform concern into action which offers hope to one child at a time.

For more details and to request copies of the “Top 10 Things You Can Do For A Foster Child” go to www.faithinckok.org.

The Doctor Is In

In addition to screening that is done by health care providers, all foster children who are younger than age 3 should also be evaluated by SoonerStart. SoonerStart is a program through the Oklahoma Department of Health that provides free screening and treatment of developmental delays in children under age 3. For children who are older than 3 but have delays, the school district in which the child lives is responsible for providing appropriate evaluation and treatment, even if the child is not old enough to attend school.

As a resource parent, what can I do to support my child’s development? Take your foster child to a health care provider for a well checkup soon after they arrive in your home, especially if new to foster care, and then regularly thereafter. Look for a provider who uses tested developmental screening questionnaires, such as the ASQ or PEDS. Call SoonerStart and ask for a developmental screening for your foster children who are younger than age 3.

Read to children – this improves speech and cognition, play games – this improves problem-solving skills, and encourage movement and activity.

Monitor your foster child closely, and if you have any concerns, ask for help. You may be the best advocate for your foster child has – don’t take no for an answer until you are satisfied your child is getting what they need.

Contact SoonerStart:
Phone: 405-271-6617
Fax: 405-271 – 4892
1000 NE 10th St., Room 709
Oklahoma City, OK 73117

Youth who have been in OKDHS or tribal custody for nine months after their 16th birthday, in an out-of-home placement, are eligible for a tuition waiver to Oklahoma state colleges and technical schools. Youth who are eligible for the Independent Living program, or were at least 16 years of age prior to adoption or guardianship, are eligible for the Education Training Voucher program which assists with costs at approved colleges and technical schools.

For both of these programs, youth must graduate from high school or obtain their GED and begin an approved college or technical school prior to the age of 21. Contact Nancy Mason at nmason@ou.edu or 918-660-3745 for more information.

Oklahoma’s Independent Living Program – Supporting Foster Youth

OKIL Program
The University of Oklahoma National Resource Center for Youth Services works under a contract with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services to provide technical assistance and training to youth, resource parents, and child welfare workers around the state in the area of Independent Living. The Oklahoma Independent Living program focuses on our teen population, promoting the importance of early planning for the future, developing each individual’s innate strengths, and ensuring the transition of young people aged 16 to 21 from state custody to self-sufficiency and successful adult living. OKIL supports youth by encouraging a multi-disciplinary approach and develops teen-targeted resources and community partnerships. A toll-free number, 1-800-397-2945, is answered from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, to help qualified current and former OKDHS and tribal custody youth access supportive services and financial assistance.

OKIL staff, located in each area of the state, also facilitate life skills activities and events, provide training to adults working with Independent Living eligible youth, develop local Youth Services Boards, and attend permanency planning reviews for IL eligible youth, providing case management when needed for former custody youth ages 18 to 21.

Transforming a dream of education and training into a reality

Youth die in the child welfare system.

Youth Services Board, and attend permanency planning reviews for IL eligible youth, providing case management when needed for former custody youth ages 18 to 21.

For information about the Oklahoma Teen Conferences or local events, contact your Area IL specialists at http://okil.turnitaround.org or call the OKIL program at 918-660-3700.

Upcoming Independent Living Events
Young adults attend teen conferences with an adult sponsor, usually on a college campus, to learn independent living skills, budgeting, home maintenance and job interviewing. These conferences provide opportunities for young people and adults to network with other youth and adults in the child welfare system.

Oklahoma Teen Conference
June 17-18, 2009
Northeastern State University
Tahlequah, Oklahoma

Oklahoma Teen Conference
July 2009
To be announced

For information about the Oklahoma Teen Conferences or local events, contact your Area IL specialists at http://www.ncrcys.ou.edu/programs/ okil.turnitaround.org or call the OKIL program at 918-660-3700.
Tax Time
You know that adopting a child can be expensive, but do you know that the law permits adoptive parents to claim a federal income tax credit for up to $11,650 for tax year 2008? The National Foster Care Association provides a great resource, the “2008 Federal Tax Benefit Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents and Kinship Caregivers,” on their Web site.

Upcoming Events
Thriving Marriages Weekend Retreats
A free two-day retreat, filled with exploring, discovery and fun, in historic Guthrie!

April 4 and 5
Adoptive couples

April 18 – 19
Foster couples

June 27 and 28
Couples in step-families

July 11 and 12
Grandparents raising grandchildren

July 25 and 26
Couples Caring for a child with a disability

August 1 and 2
Adoptive couples
Post Oak Lodge, Tulsa

To register, call 1-877-435-8033 or visit www.yourthrivingmarriage.com

National Foster Parent Association Annual Conference
Focus on the Future...Love a Child
May 4 – 8, 2009
Grand Sierra Resort, Reno, Nevada
www.nfpaonline.com

Children’s Sexual Behavior:
Normal Sexual Play Versus Problematic Sexual Behavior

Children with sexual behavior problems are typically 12 years old or younger who demonstrate developmentally inappropriate or aggressive sexual behaviors. This may include, but is not limited to, excessive masturbation, and coerced or forced sexual acts or sexual acts with children much younger than themselves through age or developmental level. Although their actions are considered sexual acts, it is important to understand that children’s motivation for these behaviors may be unrelated to sexual gratification. It is important to consider the frequency, intensity, duration and situation of sexual behavior in determining if the behavior is developmentally appropriate.

Normal sexual play:
• is exploratory and spontaneous; occurs occasionally and by mutual agreement.
• occurs with children of similar age, size and developmental level; is not associated with fear, anxiety or anger.
• decreases when redirected by an adult.
• can be controlled by increased supervision.

Problematic sexual behavior:
• is frequent, repeated, and compulsive.
• occurs with high frequency, is between children of different ages, sizes, and developmental level.

- is aggressive, forced, or coerced; does not decrease after the child is told to stop the behavior and given consequences;
- causes harm to the child or others.

When sexual behaviors occur, some guidelines for caregivers include:
• Increase supervision.
• Eyes-on contact.
• No sleepovers.
• Never allow children to play behind closed doors.
• Identify problem behaviors and attach logical consequences. For example, if child masturbates with a toy the child loses privilege of playing with that toy.
• If sharing a room with other children is necessary, baby monitors can assist in supervising children at night.
• Establish clear boundaries and rules with all children in the home.
• All family members should bathe, toilet, and change clothes in private with the exception of children who need assistance from an adult.
• Establish rules for touching in the home. For example, ask permission for hugs or other affection. Model these rules with everyone in the home.
• If you find a child in your home to be displaying problematic sexual behavior and would like treatment, please contact:
University of Oklahoma Children with Sexual Behavior Problems Group Treatment
*Preschool and School Age Groups
*405-271-8858

Oklahoma Pathways to Adulthood
Together We Can! Conference
Join us for one of the largest gatherings of child welfare professionals, resource parents, and youth service providers in the state. With Bridge-focused workshops and the Bridge In-Service training among your many choices.

April 9 – 11, 2009
The Sheraton Midwest City at the Reed Conference Center
For registration information, call 918-660-3700.

Check it out.
Most children come into foster care with powerful, often overwhelming feelings. But in spite of the circumstances that led to their separation from their birth family, children usually feel love or a connection with their birth mother or father. And hopefully, children will grow to love their resource parents, too. While our community is celebrating Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 10 and Father’s Day, Sunday, June 21, children in foster care may need guidance in sorting out confusing emotions.

You can help your children express their love for birth parents, while at the same time, letting them know that they don’t have to choose between their loyalty to their birth family and their love for their resource family. As these holidays approach, be sensitive to your children’s needs, and if appropriate, suggest these simple Mother’s or Father’s Day remembrances:

1. Help the child make a phone call or send a letter, card or e-mail to their birth parent.
2. Take a photo of the child to give, mail or e-mail.
3. Help the child select a small gift.
4. Help deliver a bouquet, purchased or picked from your garden.
5. Suggest an invisible gift – a gift-wrapped empty box full of love.
6. Help the child draw a picture of himself with his arms stretched wide, saying, “I love you this much.”
7. Help the child create a journal showing special memories of his birth parent.
8. Offer to frame the child’s artwork to give a birth parent.
9. Help the child write a story about his favorite memory of his birth parent.
10. Help the child plant a favorite flower and decorate the pot to brighten his birth parent’s room.

And don’t forget about birth grandparents, too.

Contributed by Patty Olson, Enid, Oklahoma – a 23-year veteran foster mom par excellence.