Oklahoma’s Resource Parenting Community – Teamwork 24/7!

When they say that it takes a village to raise a child, we Oklahomans know that a ranch can be even better! Peppers Ranch, just north of Edmond and west of Guthrie, is 160 acres of beautiful countryside devoted not to the production of wheat or cattle, but to the development of emotionally and physically healthy children.

The Peppers program is founded on the following Core Values:

- Children are gifts from God.
- Children need to be loved, nurtured and educated.
- Every child deserves a chance.
- Children deserve a safe and healthy place to grow into responsible adults.
- Children are gifts from God.

Peppers Ranch was developed as a long-term residential care facility for abused and neglected boys, but in the spring of 2009 the program was modified to support and assist resource parents by offering a resource parent “community.” The community provides a disciplinary program to support and assist resource parents by offering a resource parent “community.”

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• Children need to be loved, nurtured and educated.
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Children are honored by the National Foster Parent Association, the only national organization that strives to support foster parents, and remains a consistent strong voice on behalf of all children. Learn about the 40th Annual Education Conference, May 29-June 2, in Baltimore, Md. http://www.nfpaonline.org

In addition, the Foster/Adoption Recruitment Hotline 1-866-612-2565 is available to listen to recorded messages on a wide variety of child care topics, or to talk with a child development specialist.

To register for 12 hours of free online training, go first to www.fosterparentcollege.com. Here to Help

Child Care Warmline

1-888-574-5437

To listen to recorded messages on a wide variety of child care topics, or to talk with a child development specialist.

Child Care Hotline

1-800-376-9729

To assist you with problems regarding payments, policy clarification, grievance or other foster care issues.

Foster and Adoptive Parent Recruitment Hotline

1-866-612-2565

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Connections is published quarterly by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division.

A horse can be a friend and a teacher
Adoptive Families Honored at Statewide Adoption Celebration

November is National Adoption Month, and each year OKDHS celebrates adoption by honoring adoptive families, community advocates and adoption staff from each area of the state. This year, 10 adoptive families were recognized for their commitment to becoming a permanent family for children in the child welfare system.

**Area I Family of the Year: Lory Porter**

Lory epitomizes the qualities of a Bridge resource parent. With one biological child and two adopted children, Lory has looked for opportunities to maintain connections with Beth’s siblings, previous foster family, former community friends, and even her primary worker who played an important role in the child’s life. Lory invites her daughter’s sister to be a Bridge resource parent, and they are the adoptive parents of four siblings, and are working toward the adoption of the youngest sibling. The shock of going from having no children to parenting five children in such a short time span has not dimmed their optimism, even with one child’s special medical needs.

**Area III Family of the Year: Brian and Julie LaPat**

The LaPats are the busy parents of seven children, five of whom are adopted. Several of the children have special needs and require extra attention and care, but the LaPats are tireless advocates for their children and always keep a positive attitude and a smile on their faces. The LaPats are active in their church and community, and serve as a support to other adoptive parents. Having adopted sibling groups from two separate families, they demonstrate the importance of keeping siblings connected.

**Area III Family of the Year: LaShonda Young**

LaShonda’s work as a “Bridge Champion” because she embraced Bridge principles even before Bridge became agency practice. When reunification was no longer the goal for the children in her care, LaShonda wanted to adopt them to spare them another displacement and disruption in their young lives. She has maintained contact with the birth family, inviting them to medical appointments, sports events and other activities. LaShonda continues to support them and to foster a relationship with the birth family.

**Area IV Family of the Year: Victor Glenn Wilson**

Victor adopted one son in 2007, and his second son in 2009. Last January, when OKDHS offices were struggling to stay open due to extreme winter weather, he received a call to ask if he would foster an 11-year-old boy who had been brought to the local youth shelter. Parental rights would soon be terminated, and workers hoped to find a foster family that would be willing to adopt, thereby minimizing future trauma for the child. Victor talked to the rest of his family, and said “Yes!” Victor has remained steadfast in his commitment to both sons.

**Area V Family of the Year: Larry and Penny Gregg**

The Greggs have been an adoptive family for over 20 years, with three biological children and seven adopted children. Six of their seven adopted children are siblings, adopted in June 2009. Penny cares for these six children at her in-home daycare, when they were brought into the child welfare system, they were placed with maternal grandparents. Later, the Greggs became the non-relative kinship placement for all six children. Originally, the Greggs didn’t consider adoption, but when a permanent placement was needed, they didn’t want the children to be separated. The Greggs are working through challenges with birth parents, and are providing these siblings with the daily structure and security that they need.

**Area VI Family of the Year: Bill and Rebecca Madden**

Bill and Rebecca Madden decided, after a year of marriage, that they wanted to adopt - to help a child in need. Their Bridge Assessment indicated that they wanted to adopt one child, between 6 and 15 years old. At the Tulsa Adoption Party last year, the Maddens met a 10-year-old girl. They felt she was “the one” meant for them. But even great matches require a process of adjustment, and the couple has sought out counseling as well as support from their worker. Their efforts have been worthwhile, and their daughter now believes that her new parents will be there for her, through thick or thin.

**Area VI Family of the Year: Paul and Edna Drew**

Not only did this family gladly agree to become a kinship placement for their great nephew who is now 15 years old, but they also understood the importance of the sibling bond and adopted without reservation their nephew’s three siblings – all boys, who were 11 months old, 23 months old and 10 years old. The Drews are commended for their tireless and tenacious effort to keep these children connected to their kin and culture.

**Continued from page 4**

Sex Education

Sexually Transmitted Infections Handout

http://www.thereedknob.co.uk/Theres%20-%20GSTL_Info_Handout.pdf

Myths about Contraception

http://contraception.about.com/od/contraception/myths/myths.htm

Sex Education: Talking to your teen about sex

http://www.mayohost.com/Health/sex-education/C000032

Books


For Boys and Girls: Where Did I Come From? – by Peter Mayle

* Portions adapted from Mayo Clinic

Children’s Health - Sex Education: Talking to your school-age child about sex by Mayo Clinic staff, and an article by Dr. Dana Beasley, The University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.
Adoptive Parent Training Conference

Every spring and fall, the OKDHS Adoptions Unit presents a wonderful day of education, information and fellowship especially designed to address the interests of adoptive families. The fall conference is usually held in Tulsa, with the spring conference in Oklahoma City.

Some adoptive parents mark their calendars to attend every year, but other families may be unaware of the benefits of setting aside a Saturday to participate in this special event.

Randy and Shelly Bowers, Chandler, made the drive to Tulsa this year because they felt that the conference last year was so helpful to them, and they didn’t want to miss this year’s conference. In the children, Ketina finds a resource, but how much challenging that may be. Jeannie is caring for a child who is “quite a handful,” but she doesn’t feel like she’s working alone. Ketina’s support and dependability make all the difference when resource parenting responsibilities can sometimes seem overwhelming. Of all the other community partners who have been involved with children in Jeannie’s home, “Ketina is the most helpful. I wish that there were more like her!” Congratulations to Linda Hoffman, Tracy Smith, Janet Walker and Ketina Mecom, and a huge “Thank You!” to these wonderful resource parents who took a moment to acknowledge their appreciation. 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 Lou Truitt, truitt@ou.edu or call (918) 660-3770.

Make your favorite worker a star, too.

Don’t Wait to Appreciate!

Continued from page 1

Teamwork 24/7

children, and they are in the process of adopting two of their foster children. They confirmed that keeping siblings connected is an important goal in the community. Another family at the ranch is fostering the sibling of one of their foster children, so these siblings really will have shared experiences during their childhood. Another important advantage to community living is that all the children at the ranch feel a bond with each other. Even if children sometimes have less than positive interactions with other children at school or away from the ranch, they know that the community is always a safe place to come home to.

Community living gives the children access to tutors, a therapist, fishing, baseball, soccer, cookouts and a horse training program. Learning to ride and care for horses provides a model for learning how to trust and interact with people.

Linda Fuston, a single parent, and her daughter Carleena Khamasi and her husband talked about the advantages of “built-in” respite care and a support system. Linda cares for five older boys, and Carleena and her husband have one biological child and two foster children.

Linda said that before coming to the ranch, she lived in a neighborhood but didn’t know her neighbors. Now her neighbors are close-knit, close at hand and all share the common goal of taking care of children as a family and helping each other in any way that’s needed. Parents also receive weekly consultation services by a retired psychiatrist. The parents are able to discuss behavioral challenges or concerns about their children, and the psychiatrist provides practical parenting techniques and interventions to help promote healing.

When asked if there were any disadvantages to living at the ranch, Linda and Carleena both agreed – the red dirt roads. But after all, this is Oklahoma! In spite of the hassles of ranch roads, particularly in the rainy season, both foster mothers said that they would like to live at the ranch indefinitely.

The eligibility requirements for joining this unique resource parenting community are simple:

1. You must already be an OKDHS resource family and meet all OKDHS requirements.
2. You must have Christian beliefs.
3. You must share the common goal of caring for children as a family.

On the Peppers Ranch Website, www.peppersranch.com, you’ll see this theme repeated many times: “It is our goal to provide youth the tools to not just get by in life, but to become happy, successful and independent adults.”

Continued from page 5

Above and Beyond

Jeannie McGuire, a resource parent in Haskell County, thinks that worker Ketina Mecom is the best. Even though Ketina is a single parent with two small children, she still goes above and beyond. “She’s not a 9 to 5 worker!” Ketina will come to Jeannie’s house whenever there is a crisis, whether it is early in the morning, late at night or on the weekend. “One weekend night, she drove back to help me when she and her family were at the lake.” If something is needed for the weekend. “One weekend night, Jeannie McGuire

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Your Role as a “Sexuality Educator”

What is the appropriate age to begin sex education? Your child’s questions and behavior can give you the cues. And because sexuality is such a complex and integral aspect of our lives, a one-time lecture won’t do. Think instead about an ongoing series of “teachable moments.”

Toddlers are often satisfied with brief answers to questions such as where do babies come from. As children grow into the school-age years, they often ask questions that are more specific regarding babies and sex. If you don’t respond to their natural curiosity regarding sex, they will turn to others for information. Even though discussions about sexuality may feel uncomfortable for the adult as well as the child, keep in mind that other sources of information might not give your child the accurate information and guidance that they deserve.

When a school-age child asks questions about sex, it is okay to ask the child what they already know. This will allow you to correct any misinformation or misconceptions, and then offer additional information. It is important to never laugh at a question that your child asks or any judgment can be devastating for their interest in hearing about a part of life that will only become more important to them as they develop.

Things to Remember

Everyday Moments Are Key

Remember that opportunities to discuss sex are everywhere and should be taken advantage of as regularly as possible. For example, if there is a pregnancy in your family, talk about how a baby develops inside a woman’s body. If a commercial is on television for a feminine hygiene product, use it as a springboard to discuss the menstrual cycle. If there is a commercial discussing a medication for an STI, discuss how common STIs are and how to stay safe. If there is a couple on television who are dating, discuss relationships and falling in love.

Remember to take your role as a “sexuality educator” very seriously. This is your chance to teach your children to care for and respect their bodies, and to respect the rights and feelings of future partners and others who may be affected by their actions.

It is okay if you don’t have an answer to every question, but make a commitment to them that you will find an answer. Remember, giving your child accurate information and helping them develop good decision-making skills around managing their sexuality over the course of their lifetime may be one of the most important gifts that you can give them.

Kids May Act Like They’re Not Listening

But they are! Embarrassment or emotional discomfort may mask their interest in hearing about a part of life that will only become more important to them as they develop.

Resources on page 11

TOP TEN

Tips on “Best Practices” for Family Visits

Family visits are one way of maintaining foster children between foster children and their birth parents and extended families. Supporting that critical connection is one of the most important responsibilities of Bridge resource parents.

After the initial meeting, when resource parents and birth parents begin getting acquainted, OKDHS expects resource parents to take an assertive role in making sure that family visits happen throughout the child’s stay in care. However, the courts often impose restrictions or requirements that must be followed regarding visits and contact between the child and family members.

These tips on “best practices” for family visits reflect current social work knowledge and understanding about children and their families. Some may not be appropriate to a particular child due to the child’s history or court orders. Always discuss the child’s visitation plan with your worker to be sure that all team members have a clear understanding of the best way to maintain family connections. The following points were adapted from “Visitation – The Key to Children’s Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being” by Rose Marie Wentz, a training consultant for the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning.

Law and best practice says we must develop a written visitation plan.

1

All parties must know about the plan, even incarcerated parents.

2

Make visits a normal part of life. They should occur WHERE the child would be normally, and consist of the child’s normal activities.

3

Have the visits occur at a consistent date, time and place whenever possible.

4

If possible, the first visit should occur within 48 hours of placement. The younger the child, the more critical that the visit occur soon.

5

The location of the visit should be the least restrictive, most normal environment in the community that can assure the safety of the child. The agency and the jail are the least normal, most institutionalized settings. When visits occur in these locations, do not expect to see normal parent/child interaction.

6

Visits should take place (1) in the parent’s home; (2) in a relative’s home; (3) in the foster home; (4) in a park or public location.

7

Visits should be scheduled at least weekly, and more often if possible.

8

The visit should last long enough to maintain the parent/child relationship. In general, one to four hours is an appropriate time range.

9

Overnight visits can be considered when it is assured that the child can be protected in the home.

10

An important announcement for

OKDHS Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Parents

Foster/Adoptive Parent Education: THE Key to Children’s Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being

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Mediation

The Foster Care Mediation Program is a voluntary program for resource parents and child placing agencies (OKDHS), as well as private licensed agencies providing social services to children and their families. The program’s purpose is to mediate complaints concerning the rights of resource parents and the decisions of child-placing agencies that may adversely affect the safety and well-being of children in state custody. Mediation is an effective way to seek resolutions for child welfare partners voluntarily.

In the fall 2009 edition of this newsletter, there was an article focusing on teamwork, one of the Bridge Resource Family Guiding Principles. Almost everyone would agree that teamwork is a beautiful thing when it happens. Better results are accomplished, and people feel good about working together, each contributing their special skills and talents toward a worthy goal.

The article highlighted several resource parents who felt that their workers were “wonderful.” In the opinion of these resource parents, the two workers, Robyn Gibson and Kathryn Gibson (no relation), had gone above and beyond to demonstrate teamwork, to make the resource parent feel that their needs had been heard and to be creative in carrying out their work.

Readers were asked to send in more nominations for our “Above and Beyond Club,” and in this edition, we have four new “stars” to add to our constellation of workers who demonstrate that they really care.

Four More Stars!

Resource parent Shelly Blankenship, Logan County, nominated Linda Hoffman. Shelly says, “If I’m not part of the child welfare team, you could have fooled me, because Linda sure makes me feel like I’m a valued team member. Linda always returns my calls, even if it is at night or on the weekends. She has gone with me to school meetings, gone to the school to help when the children needed to be calmed down, helped me with doctor appointments, and anything else that I have asked for. She is one of the best! I’m always glad whenever I get a new child and Linda is my worker! Linda deserves some recognition for her great attitude and spirit.”

Susie and Tommie Ross are kinship resource parents in Tulsa County. They nominated Tracy Smith. “Tracy is so easy to work with. She’s never too busy to listen, assist and encourage us with any situation. We have two other foster sons who are not on her caseload, but she always checks on them as well.” The Rosses were particularly touched when a mother of twins, recently reunited, was killed in a car accident. Susie called Tracy late on Labor Day to share the sad news, and Tracy’s response was so supportive. “She is always ready and willing to help in any situation. Tracy is the best worker I’ve had the privilege of partnering with. We need more workers like her in Oklahoma. She is a true blessing for my foster children, their birth parents and us.”

Seminole County resource parent Geri Johnson nominated worker Janet Walker. “Janet has been my worker for several years, and she has always been there for my family. She always maintains a positive outlook and sincerely works toward reunification and the child’s best interest. When a child would leave our home, Janet always tried to comfort us and help us see that the goals for the child were being met. She would always praise us for a job well done. She sees good in us and tells us how much we are appreciated. Our thanks to Janet and the team in Seminole County.”

In our busy world, what’s the quickest way to get your news? E-mail. E-mail keeps the world spinning, and when OKDHS has special information for you, e-mail will get it to you quickly. But first, you have to get your e-mail address to OKDHS. Just go to http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/programs/ft.shtml and click on the link at the top of the page to submit your e-mail address.

To thank you for helping us stay in touch, each person who submits an e-mail address will receive one In-Service Training credit.

Voluntary ◆ Confidential ◆ Fair ◆ Speedy ◆ No cost

The Above and Beyond Club

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, sfink@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!
The Pittsburg County support group has been meeting monthly, in the evening, but beginning in January, President Krista Todd hopes to establish a new meeting time, probably on a Saturday, that will be convenient for more resource and adoptive parents. Krista feels that the support group is very valuable for parents caring for children from the child welfare system.

“You can’t just ask your friends or neighbors for advice. Besides confidentiality issues, parenting children from foster care brings different challenges and experiences that other parents haven’t had to face,” says Todd. “Only other resource parents really understand what it’s like to partner with OKDHS, follow OKDHS and court requirements, and care for children who have been traumatized in multiple ways.”

Sharing an hour or two each month with resource parents who do understand can be a good way to re-energize yourself and balance your perspective. The group tries to offer an educational program at each meeting. A CASA worker or pediatrician might speak, or someone might share information about a good resource in the area. Participants can earn one in-service training credit at each meeting, so their 12-credit requirement is much easier to accomplish.

In addition to training credits, the support group arranges for on-site baby sitting. Frequently, a pot-luck dinner will be planned. An opportunity to network, socialize, learn something new and have dinner, where all your children are welcome, is pretty hard to turn down!

The group meets at the Church of Christ at Main and Oklahoma in McAlester. For more information, please contact Krista at (918) 916-7967. All Pittsburg county resource parents are welcome, as well as families from neighboring communities.

## Community Partners Offer Help to Foster Children

During 2009, the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) hosted five community meetings with a focus on foster care support services. Approximately 200 people attended who were interested in learning more about what they can do to help Oklahoma’s foster children. The first two gatherings were presented as “Fostering Hope for Children,” but the name has transitioned to a new permanent campaign name, “Change a Child’s Forever.”

OFBCI plans to host two to four community gatherings in 2010 and help create a more cohesive network of foster care service providers through facilitating relationship-building meetings. If you know of foster care or adoptive ministries/service providers in your area, please forward their contact information to info@faithlinksok.org.

Part of OFBCI’s mission is to connect faith and community groups with the right opportunities to serve our resource families and children. Recently, Glasco Chiropractic in Oklahoma City offered to provide chiropractic care at no charge for abused or neglected children under 18 years of age. Chiropractic care focuses on complaints related to the back, neck, shoulder, elbow, knee, foot, etc. Any additional health concerns are addressed on a case-by-case basis.

For more information, visit www.glascochiropractic.com or call (405) 691-8775. Glasco Chiropractic is located at 2201 SW 119th in Oklahoma City.

## Seminars for Young People and their Resource Parents

The Oklahoma Independent Living program offers seminars on the topics of Education, Employment, Health and Housing. For details, contact Marilyn Foster at (918) 660-3728 or your Area Independent Living Specialist [http://www.rcs.co.ok.us/programs/IDL_specialists.shtml](http://www.rcs.co.ok.us/programs/IDL_specialists.shtml). The OKDHS and court requirements, and care for children who have been traumatized in multiple ways.

## “New Directions” for Children Exposed to Substance Abuse

According to New Directions Program Director Susan R. Schmidt, Ph.D., children whose parents abuse substances often live in an unpredictable, even volatile and dangerous environment.

Poverty, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect are often part of the home life these children experience on a regular basis,” she said. In addition to these physical threats, studies find that these children are at higher risk for:

- Developmental delays
- Behavioral disorders
- Poor school performance
- Mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, behavioral
- Substance abuse.

New Directions strives to help children survive and thrive by teaching safe and effective coping skills, enhancing the skills of resource parents, and creating greater stability in the resource home. “Our goal is not to allow parental substance abuse to define the trajectory of children’s lives,” said Dr. Schmidt.

“Through active collaboration with the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHAS), OKDHS, and both traditional and kinship resource providers, we hope to enhance and promote children’s resilience and healthy development.” Partnering with the Oklahoma Partnership Initiative (OPI), funded through the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, New Directions offers its services at no cost to participants.

These services include:

- Developmental screenings for preschool children
- IQ/cognitive screenings for school-age children
- Mental health assessments
- 12-week group program to build children’s coping skills and abilities to function better in their current placements
- Education, linkage to resources and advocacy for resource parents
- Reunification support for children and biological parents, when applicable
- Individual therapy services, when applicable

Resource parents can receive up to 18 hours of in-service training credit for group participation.

New Directions is located in Oklahoma City, and child welfare professionals, as well as resource and biological parents, can refer a child to the program from anywhere in the state. For more information or to make a referral, call (405) 271-8858. Visit their Web site at [orumedicine.com/ newdirections](http://orumedicine.com/newdirections). Group sessions at New Directions occur weekly on the number above to learn when the next group sessions begin.
A New Meeting Day for the Pittsburg County Foster/Adoption Association

The Pittsburg County support group has been meeting monthly, in the evening, but beginning in January, President Krista Todd hopes to establish a new meeting time, probably on a Saturday, that will be convenient for more resource and adoptive parents. Krista feels that the support group is very valuable for parents caring for children from the child welfare system.

“You can’t just ask your friends or neighbors for advice. Besides confidentiality issues, parenting children from foster care brings different challenges and experiences that other parents haven’t had to face,” says Todd. “Only other resource parents really understand what it’s like to partner with OKDHS, follow OKDHS and court requirements, and care for children who have been traumatized in multiple ways.”

Sharing an hour or two each month with resource parents who do understand can be a good way to re-energize yourself and balance your perspective. The group tries to offer an educational program at each meeting. A CASA worker or pediatrician might speak, or someone might share information about a good resource in the area. Participants can earn one in-service training credit at each meeting, so their 12-credit requirement is much easier to accomplish.

In addition to training credits, the support group arranges for on-site baby sitting. Frequently, a pot-luck dinner will be planned. An opportunity to network, socialize, learn something new and have dinner, where all your children are welcome, is pretty hard to turn down!

The group meets at the Church at Christ at Main and Oklahoma in McAlester. For more information, please contact Krista at (918) 916-7967. All Pittsburg county resource parents are welcome, as well as families from neighboring communities.

Community Partners Offer Help to Foster Children

During 2009, the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) hosted five community meetings with a focus on foster care support services. Approximately 200 people attended who were interested in learning more about what they can do to help Oklahoma’s foster children. The first two gatherings were presented as “Fostering Hope for Children,” but the name has transitioned to a new permanent campaign name, “Change a Child’s Forever.”

OFBCI plans to host two to four community gatherings in 2010 and help create a more cohesive network of foster care service providers through facilitating relationship-building meetings. If you know of foster care or adoptive ministries/service providers in your area, please forward their contact information to info@faithlinksok.org.

Part of OFBCI’s mission is to connect faith and community groups with the right opportunities to serve our resource families and children. Recently, Glasco Chiropractic in Oklahoma City offered to provide chiropractic care at no charge for abused or neglected children under 18 years of age. Chiropractic care focuses on complaints related to the back, neck, shoulder, elbow, knee, foot, etc. Any additional health concerns are addressed on a case-by-case basis.

For more information, visit www.glascochiropractic.com or call (405) 691-8775. Glasco Chiropractic is located at 2201 SW 119th in Oklahoma City.

Seminars for Young People and their Resource Parents

The Oklahoma Independent Living program offers seminars on the topics of Education, Employment, Health and Housing. For details, contact Marilyn Foster at (918) 660-3728 or your Area Independent Living Specialist http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/programs/okil_specialists.shtml

New Directions for Children Exposed to Substance Abuse

The substance abuse of parents can bring devastating consequences to the lives of their children. In Oklahoma, parental substance abuse is the primary or secondary cause of nearly half of all child welfare cases. New Directions is a program designed to help children ages 3 to 12 in foster care overcome the effects of parental substance abuse.

According to New Directions Program Director Susan R. Schmidt, Ph.D., children whose parents abuse substances often live in an unpredictable, even volatile and dangerous environment.

“Poverty, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect are often part of the home life these children experience on a regular basis,” she said. In addition to these physical threats, studies find that these children are at higher risk for:

- Developmental delays
- Behavioral disorders
- Poor school performance
- Mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, behavioral

“New Directions” for Children Exposed to Substance Abuse

• 12-week group program to build children’s coping skills and abilities to function better in their current placements
• Education, linkage to resources and advocacy for resource parents
• Reunification support for children and biological parents, when applicable
• Individual therapy services, when applicable

Resource parents can receive up to 18 hours of in-service training credit for group participation.

New Directions is located in Oklahoma City, and child welfare professionals, as well as resource and biological parents, can refer a child to the program from anywhere in the state. For more information or to make a referral, call (405) 271-8858. Visit their Web site at humedine.com/newdirections

Group sessions at New Directions occur weekly on Thursdays from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Prior to the sessions, families are invited to share a complimentary meal served at 5:30. Please call the number above to learn when the next group sessions begin.

...children whose parents abuse substances often live in an unpredictable, even volatile and dangerous environment.

“New Directions” for Children Exposed to Substance Abuse

- Mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, behavioral

Problems and low self-esteem
- Early risk-taking behaviors, including substance abuse
- Poor interpersonal relationships

New Directions strives to help children survive and thrive by teaching safe and effective coping skills, enhancing the skills of

resource parents, and creating greater stability in the resource home.

“Our goal is not to allow parental substance abuse to define the trajectory of children’s lives,” said Dr. Schmidt. “Through active collaboration with the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS), OKDHS, and both traditional and kinship resource providers, we hope to enhance and promote children’s resilience and healthy development.”

Partnering with the Oklahoma Partnership Initiative (OPI), funded through the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, New Directions offers its services at no cost to participants.

These services include:
- Developmental screenings for preschool children
- IQ/cognitive screenings for school-age children
- Mental health assessments
The Foster Care Mediation Program is a voluntary program for resource parents and child placing agencies (OKDHS, as well as private licensed agencies providing social services to children and their families). The program’s purpose is to mediate complaints concerning the rights of resource parents and the decisions of child-placing agencies that may adversely affect the safety and well-being of children in state custody. Mediation is an effective way to help individuals and organizations who disagree to discuss the problem and come to a mutually acceptable resolution. The mediator’s role is to help parties find their own common ground, often eliminating the need to escalate the dispute. The mediator is a volunteer who is experienced with the process of mediation, and has received special training involving the Foster Parent Bill of Rights and the juvenile justice/child welfare system. Mediation, however, is not a substitute for legal help.

The Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY) has established a toll-free number specifically for the Foster Care Mediation Program. When OCCY receives a request for mediation, they contact all parties to ask for their voluntary involvement in the process. If all parties agree, the case will be referred to the Alternative Dispute Resolution System, which will arrange for a mediator.

To contact the Foster Care Mediation Program: (800) 822-0899 or www.okkids.org

Voluntary ❖ Confidential ❖ Fair ❖ Speedy ❖ No cost

In our busy world, what’s the quickest way to get your news? E-mail. E-mail keeps the world spinning, and when OKDHS has special information for you, e-mail will get it to you quickly. But first, you have to get your e-mail address to OKDHS. Just go to http://www.nrcys.ou.edu/programs/rft.shtml and click on the link at the top of the page to submit your e-mail address. To thank you for helping us stay in touch, each person who submits an e-mail address will receive one In-Service Training credit.

**The Above and Beyond Club**

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!
Your Role as a “Sexuality Educator”

What is the appropriate age to begin sex education? Your child’s questions and behavior can give you the cues. And because sexuality is such a complex and integral aspect of our lives, a one-time lecture won’t do. Think instead about an ongoing series of “teachable moments.”

Toddlers are often satisfied with brief answers to questions such as where do babies come from. As children grow into the school-age years, they often ask questions that are more specific regarding babies and sex. If you don’t respond to their natural curiosity regarding sex, they will turn to others for information. Even though discussions about sexuality may feel uncomfortable for the adult as well as the child, keep in mind that other sources of information might not give your child the accurate information and guidance that they deserve.

When a school-age child asks questions about sex, it is okay to ask the child what they already know. This will allow you to correct any misinformation or misconceptions, and then offer additional information. It is important to never laugh at a question that your child asks or any misconception they may have. It is also important to help children learn the proper names for private parts. Understanding their body assists them in keeping themselves safe, teaches them not to be embarrassed about changes during adolescence, and helps to develop a more mature attitude about sex.

Important Topics to Discuss

Responsibilities and Consequences

It is important to talk to your child about both the physical and emotional aspects of consciously choosing or passively allowing themselves to become sexually active, such as contracting sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, and a variety of emotions that they may feel. By talking to your child early about these topics, they can think about these issues prior to a situation where they may feel pressure to become sexually active before they are ready. When discussing the dangers of sex with your child, it is also important to explain to your child that sex can be a wonderful thing when all the circumstances are right.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Specifically, give children information that they can read regarding common infections and misconceptions of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Teens as well as children usually have limited information regarding how to keep their bodies healthy, and often believe false information regarding common infections.

Common Misconceptions of Pregnancy and Contraception

Many young people are confused by misconceptions regarding pregnancy and contraceptive use. It is important to give your children, boys and girls, accurate information so that they are able to prevent pregnancy until they are prepared to be parents. An open dialogue about this important aspect of life is vital because the consequences of ignorance combined with immature judgment can be devastating for your young person and the other lives which are affected.

Things to Remember

Everyday Moments Are Key

Remember that opportunities to discuss sex are everywhere and should be taken advantage of as regularly as possible. For example, if there is a pregnancy in your family, talk about how a baby develops inside a woman’s body. If a commercial is on television for a feminine hygiene product, use it as a springboard to discuss the menstrual cycle. If there is a commercial discussing a medication for an STI, discuss how common STIs are and how to stay safe. If there is a couple on television who are dating, discuss relationships and falling in love. Remember to take your role as a “sexuality educator” very seriously. This is your chance to teach your children to care for and respect their bodies, and to respect the rights and feelings of future partners and others who may be affected by their actions.

It is okay if you don’t have an answer to every question, but make a commitment to them that you will find an answer. Remember, giving your child accurate information and helping them develop good decision-making skills around managing their sexuality over the course of their lifetime may be one of the most important gifts that you can give them.

Kids May Act Like They’re Not Listening

But they are! Embarrassment or emotional discomfort may mask their interest in hearing about a part of life that will only become more important to them as they develop.

Resources on page 11

TOP TEN

Tips on “Best Practices” for Family Visits

1. Law and best practice says we must develop a written visitation plan.

Family visits are one way of maintaining foster children and their birth parents and extended families. Supporting that critical connection is one of the most important responsibilities of Bridge resource parents.

After the initial meeting, when resource parents and birth parents begin getting acquainted, OKHHS expects resource parents to take an assertive role in making sure that family visits happen throughout the child’s stay in care. However, the courts often impose restrictions or requirements that must be followed regarding visits and contact between the child and family members.

These tips on “best practices” for family visits reflect current social work knowledge and understanding about children and their families. Some may not be appropriate to a particular child due to the child’s history or court orders. Always discuss the child’s visitation plan with your worker to be sure that all team members have a clear understanding of the best way to maintain family connections. The following points were adapted from “Visitation – The Key to Children’s Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being” by Rose Marie Wentz, a training consultant for the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning.

2. All parties must know about the plan, even incarcerated parents.

3. Make visits a normal part of life. They should occur WHERE the child would be normally, and consist of the child’s normal activities.

4. Have the visits occur at a consistent date, time and place whenever possible.

5. If possible, the first visit should occur within 48 hours of placement. The younger the child, the more critical that the visit occur soon.

6. The location of the visit should be the least restrictive, most normal environment in the community that can assure the safety of the child. The agency and the jail are the least normal, most institutionalized settings. When visits occur in these locations, do not expect to see normal parent/child interaction.

7. Visits should take place (1) in the parent’s home; (2) in a relative’s home; (3) in the foster home; (4) in a park or public location.

8. Visits should be scheduled at least weekly, and more often if possible.

9. The visit should last long enough to maintain the parent/child relationship. In general, one to four hours is an appropriate time range.

10. Overnight visits can be considered when it is assured that the child can be protected in the home.
Adoptive Parent Training Conference

Every spring and fall, the OKDHS Adoptions Unit presents a wonderful day of education, information and fellowship especially designed to address the interests of adoptive families. The fall conference is usually held in Tulsa, with the spring conference in Oklahoma City.

Some adoptive parents mark their calendars to attend every year, but other families may be unaware of the benefits of setting aside a Saturday to participate in this special event.

Randy and Shelly Bowser, Chandler, made the drive to Tulsa this year because they felt that the conference last year was so helpful to them, and they didn’t want to miss this year’s conference. In the

2008 conference, a three-hour workshop on the Bridge approach to resource parenting was included among other workshop options.

“We learned a lot. We’re using the Bridge concept in our parenting,” the Bowsers said. “We’ve invited birthparents to our home, and we’ve visited theirs. We go out to eat together, and we try to encourage them to do what they need to do to have their children reunited. We even offer to teach them how to clean their house and how to feed their children if they’ve never had an opportunity to learn those things.”

The Bowsers feel that last year’s conference gave them a fresh, new perspective on their role as resource parents, and they’re expecting that this year’s conference will be just as beneficial.

Donna Arney, Okay, said she also attended the Adoptive Parent Training Conference once before. She chose to return this year because she knows that “things always change, and I don’t want to miss out on new information.” Donna wanted to ask questions about OKDHS’ assistance with day care payments, and she knew that adoptive staff would be on hand to answer her questions. Donna said the “speakers are awesome, and informative,” and the conference was “well worth the drive.”

OKDHS also provides lunch and reimbursement for child care ($50 per child, up to two children per family) to relieve the financial burden of attending the conference.

Don’t Wait to Appreciate!

Continued from page 5 Above and Beyond

Jeannie McGuire, a resource parent in Haskell County, thinks that working Ketina Mecom is the best. Even though Ketina is a single parent with two small children, she still goes above and beyond. “She’s not a 9 to 5 worker!” Ketina will come to Jeannie’s house whenever there is a crisis, whether it is early in the morning, late at night or on the weekend. “One weekend night, she drove back to help me when she and her family were at the lake.” If something is needed for the

children, Ketina finds a resource, no matter how challenging that may be. Jeannie is caring for a child who is “quite a handful,” but she doesn’t feel like she’s working alone. Ketina’s support and dependability make all the difference when resource parenting responsibilities can sometimes seem overwhelming. Of all the other community partners who have been involved with children in Jeannie’s home, “Ketina is the most helpful. I wish that there were more like her!” Congratulations to Linda Hoffman, Tracy Smith, Janet Walker and Ketina Mecom, and a huge “Thank You!” to these wonderful resource parents who took a moment to acknowledge their appreciation. 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 Lou Truitt, truitt@ou.edu or call (918) 660-3770.

Make your favorite worker a star, too.

Congratulations to Linda Hoffman, Tracy Smith, Janet Walker and Ketina Mecom, and a huge “Thank You!” to these wonderful resource parents who took a moment to acknowledge their appreciation. 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 Lou Truitt, truitt@ou.edu or call (918) 660-3770.

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Don’t Wait to Appreciate!

Continued from page 1 Teamwork 24/7

children, and they are in the process of adopting two of their foster children. They confirmed that keeping siblings connected is an important goal in the community. Another family at the ranch is fostering the sibling of one of their foster children. These siblings really will have shared experiences during their childhood. Another important advantage to community living is that all the children at the ranch feel a bond with each other. Even if children sometimes have less than positive interactions with other children at school or away from the ranch, they know that the community is always a safe place to come home to. Community living gives the children access to tutors, a therapist, fishing, baseball, soccer, cookouts and a horse training program. Learning to ride and care for horses provides a model for learning how to trust and interact with people.

Linda Fuson, a single parent, and her daughter Carleena Khamasi and her husband talked about the advantages of “built-in” respite care and a support system. Linda cares for five older boys, and Carleena and her husband have one biological child and two foster children. Linda said that before coming to the ranch, she lived in a neighborhood but didn’t know her neighbors. Now her neighbors are close-knit, close at hand and all share the common goal of taking care of children as a family and helping each other in any way that’s needed. Parents also receive weekly consultation services by a retired psychiatrist. The parents are able to discuss behavioral challenges or concerns about their children, and the psychiatrist provides practical parenting techniques and interventions to help promote healing.

When asked if there were any disadvantages to living at the ranch, Linda and Carleena both agreed – the red dirt roads. But after all, this is Oklahoma! In spite of the hassles of ranch roads, particularly in the rainy season, both foster mothers said that they would like to live at the ranch indefinitely.

The eligibility requirements for joining this unique resource parenting community are simple:

1. You must already be an OKDHS resource family and meet all OKDHS requirements.
2. You must have Christian beliefs.
3. You must share the common goal of caring for children as a family.

On the Peppers Ranch Website, www.peppers ranch.com, you’ll see this theme repeated many times: “It is our goal to provide youth the tools to not just get by in life, but to become happy, successful and independent adults.”
Adoptive Families Honored at Statewide Adoption Celebration

November is National Adoption Month, and each year OKDHS celebrates adoption by honoring adoptive families, community advocates and adoption staff from each area of the state. This year, 10 adoptive families were recognized for their commitment to becoming a permanent family for children in the child welfare system.

Area I Family of the Year: Lory Porter

Lory epitomizes the qualities of a Bridge resource parent. With one biological child and two adopted children, Lory has looked for opportunities to maintain connections with Beth’s siblings, previous foster family, former community friends, and even her primary worker who played an important role in the child’s life. Lory invites her daughter’s sister to join in family activities and clearly understands the importance of connections in developing a healthy self-image and sense of security.

Area II Family of the Year: Ronnie and Melynna Beaty

The Beatys are a family who understands the importance of sibling connections, and they do everything possible to strengthen that bond for their five children. They decided to become resource parents in 2006 after providing respite care for a foster child. Now they are the adoptive parents of four siblings, and are working toward the adoption of the youngest sibling. The shock of going from having no children to parenting five children in such a short time span has not dimmed their optimism, even with one child’s special medical needs.

Area III Family of the Year: Brian and Julie LaPat

The LaPats are the busy parents of seven children, five of whom are adopted. Several of the children have special needs and require extra attention and care, but the LaPats are tireless advocates for their children and always keep a positive attitude and a smile on their faces. The LaPats are active in their church community, and serve as a support to other adoptive parents. Having adopted sibling groups from two separate families, they demonstrate the importance of keeping siblings connected.

Area III Family of the Year: Julius and Velma Hall

The Halls have been kinship parents since 1999 and adopted their four grandsons in 2009. The boys had been reunified with their mother three times, and the Halls supported and mentored her to give her every opportunity to retain custody. However, after parental rights were terminated, they wanted to provide a permanent home to their grandsons, and also a half-brother, so that the five siblings would not be separated. Even after adoption, the Halls continue to support their grandparents’ relationship with their mother and the maternal extended family. The Halls live the Bridge Guiding Principle that Bridge families must separate the birth parent’s past actions from who they are, believing that, with support, anyone can change.

Area IV Family of the Year: LaShonda Young

LaShonda’s workers describe her as a “Bridge Champion” because she embraced Bridge principles even before Bridge became agency practice. When reunification was no longer the goal for the children in her care, LaShonda wanted to adopt them to spare them another disappointment and disruption in their young lives. She has maintained contact with the birth family, inviting them to medical appointments, sports events and special occasions, and even though this continued contact after adoption has brought some challenges, LaShonda has never wavered in her commitment to their children, or maintaining their connections to their other important relationships.

Area III Family of the Year: Tommy and Susan Sparks

The Sparks are the adoptive parents of three children. When Bridge was introduced to OKDHS resource families, the Sparks cooperated in every way to support reunification for the children in their care. During this time, the children’s mother gave birth to a baby who had many medical needs. Because of their commitment to the sibling connection, they asked to foster this new baby, and then later, to adopt all the children. The family has been a wonderful team partner in putting into practice OKDHS child welfare goals.

Area IV Family of the Year: Victor Glenn Wilson

Victor adopted one son in 2007, and his second son in 2009. Last January, when OKDHS offices were struggling to stay open due to extreme winter weather, he received a call to ask if he would foster an 11-year-old boy who had been brought to the local youth shelter. Parental rights would soon be terminated, and workers hoped to find a foster family that would be willing to adopt, thereby minimizing future trauma for the child. Victor talked to the rest of his family, and said “Yes!” Victor has remained steadfast in his commitment to both sons.

Area V Family of the Year: Larry and Penny Gregg

The Greggs have been an adoptive family for over 20 years, with three biological children and seven adopted children. Six of their seven adopted children are siblings, adopted in June 2009. Penny cared for these six children at her in-home daycare, but when they were brought into the child welfare system, they were placed with maternal grandparents. Later, the Greggs became the non-relative kinship placement for all six children. Originally, the Greggs didn’t consider adoption, but when a permanent placement was needed, they didn’t want the children to be separated. The Greggs are working through challenges with birth parents, and are providing these siblings with the daily structure and security that they need.

Area VI Family of the Year: William and Rebecca Madden

Bill and Rebecca Madden decided, after a year of marriage, that they wanted to adopt - to help a child in need. Their Bridge Assessment indicated that they wanted to adopt one child, between 5 and 15 years old. At the Tulsa Adoption Party last year, the Maddens met a 10-year-old girl. They felt she was “the one” meant for them. But even great matches require a process of adjustment, and the couple has sought out counseling as well as support from their worker. Their efforts have been worthwhile, and their daughter now believes that her new parents will be there for her, through thick or thin.

Area VI Family of the Year: Paul and Edna Drew

Not only did this family gladly agree to become a kinship placement for their great nephew who is now 15 years old, but they also understood the importance of the sibling bond and adopted without reservation their nephew’s three siblings – all boys, who were 11 months old, 23 months old and 10 years old. The Drews are commended for their tireless and tenacious effort to keep these children connected to their kin and culture.

* Portions adapted from Mayo Clinic Children’s Health - Sex Education: Talking to your school-age child about sex by Mayo Clinic staff, and an article by Dr. Dana Beasley, The University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.
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Child Care Warmline
1-888-574-5437
To listen to recorded messages on a wide variety of child care topics, or to talk with a child development specialist.

Foster Parent Hotline
Here to Help
1-800-376-9729
To assist you with problems regarding payments, policy clarification, grievance or other foster care issues.

Foster and Adoptive Parent Recruitment Hotline
1-866-612-2565

When they say that it takes a village to raise a child, we Oklahomans know that a ranch can be even better! Peppers Ranch, just north of Edmond and west of Guthrie, is 160 acres of beautiful countryside devoted not to the production of wheat or cattle, but to the development of emotionally and physically healthy children.

The Peppers program is founded on the following Core Values:

• Children are gifts from God.
• Children need to be loved, nurtured and educated.
• Children deserve a safe place to grow into responsible adults.
• Every child deserves a chance.

Originally, Peppers Ranch was developed as a long-term residential care facility for abused and neglected boys, but in the spring of 2009 the program was modified to support and assist resource parents by offering a resource parent “community.” The community provides an equestrian center and an agricultural center, baseball and soccer fields, playgrounds, a fort and a stocked 8-acre pond. But even more important than this wonderful array of educational opportunities is that the program provides a disciplined environment to support the development of responsible behavioral skills, academic skills, social discipline, spiritual principles and physical activity.

Four families are currently living at the ranch, and construction is underway on homes for two more families. When asked about their experience living in a spiritual community, here are the perspectives of some of the families: Travis and Tonya Ratcliff have four biological children, one of whom has Down syndrome and two other foster children. Travis was overwhelmed with the spirit of the program and wanted to share: “...”

Peppers is helping them to this end.

For more information, please visit

www.questbridge.org
www.onpaware.org
www.fosterparentcollege.com
www.fosterparentcollege.com

350 E. 15th Street
Oklahoma City, OK 73104
(405) 521-3438

The Peppers program is founded on the following Core Values:

• Must be an American citizen.
• Must provide a home that is a safe environment.
• Must be able to provide food security.
• Must be able to provide access to medical care.
• Must be able to provide transportation.

QuestBridge has worked for 15 years to place top-tier college within reach for outstanding low-income students. For more information, please visit www.questbridge.org.

Oklahoma’s Resource Parenting Community – Teamwork 24/7!

A horse can be a friend and a teacher

Continued on page 3