



Meeting the Couple and Co-Parenting Relationship Needs of Foster Parents in Georgia:

A Needs Assessment of DFCS County Directors

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Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children Services or Promoting Safe and Stable Families.



To learn more about the Couples and Relationship Enrichment (CARE) Laboratory, visit <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/hdfs/care-lab>.

Learn more about how UGA Extension is strengthening relationships at www.gamarriages.org.

Table 1. Foster Care Profile of Counties Represented by DFCS County Directors who Responded to Survey.

	Overall Total (N=90 counties)	By Number of Counties Directed (N=54 Directors) ^a		
		1 (n=29)	2 (n=18)	3-4 (n=8)
Approximate Number of Youth in Foster Care				
Range	0-830	2-830	11-1300	11-81
Mean (SD)	86.74 (147.37)	152.46 (178.96)	166.78 (293.83)	42.00 (25.71)
Sum total	7893	4555	3002	336
Approximate Number of Licensed Foster Parent Families (not group care facilities)				
Range	0-138	3-138	0-210	5-28
Mean (SD)	14.75 (23.02)	23.41 (26.59)	28.56 (47.67)	12.38 (8.21)
Sum total	1298	685	514	99
Approximate Number of Foster Youth who Reside in Licensed Foster Parent Family Homes (not group care facilities)				
Range	0-400	1-250	0-750	6-63
Mean (SD)	38.54 (73.51)	63.80 (72.72)	72.12 (177.79)	24.13 (18.29)
Sum total	3237	1818	1226	193

^a The total numbers reflect the sum across all counties each director reported supervising. As such, the numbers reflected in the range and mean (SD) may be greater than the numbers reflected in the "overall total" column.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Assessing Foster Parent Needs

What we know. Retaining quality foster parents and promoting healthy, low-stress and stable placements for youth in the foster care system is a state priority. And, while foster parenting can be very rewarding, foster parents have a variety of service needs due to the many unique stressors they experience. As such, DFCS utilizes a variety of established strategies and tools to engage foster parents to assess their needs and, together, develop a plan and identify services to meet those needs.

Survey Findings. To help us better understand this process, we asked DFCS County Directors to describe how their agency assesses the needs of foster parents. The strategies that they identified tended to vary by delivery type and timing, but were similar in approach. Some indicated that they utilize a formalized Resource Development Team that works with foster parents. In addition, many Directors identified that supervisors and case managers meet monthly with foster parents and the children in their homes to assess needs. It was frequently shared that feedback from foster parents on their experiences and needs is gathered via verbal or written communication. As well, foster parents are asked to complete the "Caregiver Feedback Form" administered by DFCS annually or more often should circumstances warrant. A few sample comments shared by DFCS County Directors include:

- *We have developed a regional Resource Development team which make monthly contacts with our foster parents and report back their concerns and needs.*
- *Each home has an assigned resource development case manager. They are tasked with the responsibility to continually assess the foster parent's needs at every contact and annual reevaluation.*
- *Our RD [Case Manager] in this county has over 25 years with the agency. She does a wonderful job nurturing and listening to the needs of the foster parents, as she has developed a strong relationship with the families and these families respect her.*
- *Our agency has a supervisor who meets with the foster parents monthly to assess their needs and ensure both, the foster parent and child are thriving.*
- *Open communication with foster parents asking what their needs are in addition to our own assessment of what their needs are.*

Implications. These findings reinforce that an existing system is in place to regularly assess foster parents' unique needs. As such, collaborating with these teams and/or individuals would facilitate our efforts to identify and engage foster parents in greatest need for services designed to support healthy couple and co-parenting relationships.

Training and Relationship Service Needs of Foster Parents

What we know. Foster parents must possess a strong understanding of foster children's unique needs, have good mental and emotional health, and demonstrate extra skills in order to create a high-quality home environment for foster children. To support foster parents in Georgia in developing these competencies, foster parents are required to participate in a 20-hour training: *Initial Interest, Mutual Selection, Pre-Service Training, Assessment, Continuing Development and Teamwork* (IMPACT). Developed by the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Division of Family and Children Services, IMPACT focuses on the IV-B Core Competencies for Pre-Service Training and addresses a variety of topics, including: teamwork, permanency, trauma, loss and grief, attachment, emotional disturbances, sexuality and sexual abuse, behavior management, merging family systems, and available resources to support foster parents³. Foster parents also are required to receive a certain number of Continuing Education Credits (CEUs) per year to maintain their foster home license. Attendance to training can be challenging due to the proximity and accessibility of trainings as well as the coordination of child care and Respite care services.

Survey Findings. We asked DFCS County Directors their opinions on (a) how prepared they felt foster parents are for the foster parenting experience after completing the IMPACT training, (b) how much stress the foster parenting experience places on foster parents' couple and co-parenting relationship, and (c) whether they currently refer foster parents to services designed to strengthen the couple and/or co-parenting relationship (if the need arises). Findings are summarized in Table 2. The majority of Directors (73%) reported that foster parents are somewhat prepared for their new role after completing the IMPACT training. Furthermore, although they indicated that the foster parenting experience places some (51%) or a lot of (31%) stress on their couple/co-parenting relationship, only 24% reported referring foster parents to services to meet relationship needs. A few sample comments shared by DFCS County Directors include:

- *We often find children disrupt due to difference of opinion between the foster mother and foster father. Parenting is hard in general, to add on a child you have not raised from birth to the mix could be difficult on a relationship.*
- *Relationship building would help with parents joining together to meet the needs of the children placed in their homes instead of the bulk of the parenting responsibilities falling on one partner.*
- *For the most part, I think DFCS (or at least my agency) does a good job in assessing the strength of the marriage and addressing the stress of fostering on the relationship during consults.*
- *The need for strengthening the couple relationship is critical and we do not provide support for this need at this point in time.*

To gauge potential barriers to foster parents participating in the proposed relationship enrichment training, we asked Directors their opinions regarding travel and respite care needs (see Table 2). Most directors reported that the furthest distances foster parents would be willing to drive to attend training was about 30 to 60 minutes (86%) and that using Respite to attend trainings was difficult (74%). In addition, 44 Directors replied to an open-ended question related to barriers to foster parents attending training. Comments reflected difficulties associated with competing work and family demands (e.g., "work and general life schedules make it hard for foster parents to attend trainings," "Children's extracurricular activities also create a challenge with trainings"), accessibility (e.g., "location of the training", "transportation/distance"), availability of training opportunities and resources (e.g., "In small counties such as [County], resources -or lack thereof - are the most common barriers." "Most of the trainings held at the agency on weekends have better turnout but that requires staff to work 50+ per week and not be able to see their families"), and respite/child care (e.g. "Child care and respite is a HUGE issue. We really don't have enough placements for all our children in care, so there certainly aren't enough placements to offer respite to foster parents when requested.").

Implications. These findings suggest that additional training is needed to support foster parents, particularly training and services focused on supporting foster parents' couple and co-parenting relationship needs. While IMPACT reinforces skills to enhance parenting self-efficacy and quality, research reinforces that parenting quality alone may not be enough: children exposed to high-quality parenting and high-quality couple relationships do better on several outcomes (Cummings & Merrilees, 2010). However, current training is not available to address the impact of becoming foster parents on the couple and co-parenting relationship or to teach foster parents strategies for maintaining a healthy relationship through the challenges of foster parenting. Additionally, to facilitate participation in our proposed training, both location/accessibility as well as child care needs should be considered. It will be our goal to host these trainings in service areas that minimize travel time and costs. As illustrated in the figure (on page 1), 105 counties are located either within 60 minutes' drive (n=57) or within 90 minutes' drive (n=48) of at least one of the five proposed counties where relationship enrichment trainings will be scheduled. As well, we

³ For more information about IMPACT, visit <https://dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/impact-introduction>.

intend to provide on-site childcare services to facilitate participation in the trainings. Last, scheduling the trainings across the state and on the weekend will accommodate the challenges associated with coordinating Respite, competing child and family activities, and limited time available to participate in services commonly offered across multiple sessions/weeks.

Table 2. DFCS County Directors' Views Regarding Foster Parent Training and Needs

	Overall Total (N=55)	By Number of Counties Directed			By Number of Foster Parents in County		
		1 (n=29)	2 (n=18)	3-4 (n=8)	<10 (n=18)	11-20 (n=18)	21> (n=17)
Prepared for foster parenting experience after IMPACT^a							
Not sure	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
1. Not very prepared	16.4%	10.3%	16.7%	37.5%	16.7%	11.1%	17.6%
2. Somewhat prepared	72.7%	79.3%	72.2%	50.0%	77.8%	77.8%	64.7%
3. Mostly prepared	10.9%	10.3%	11.1%	12.5%	5.6%	11.1%	17.6%
Mean(SD)	1.95 (0.52)	2.00 (0.46)	1.94 (0.54)	1.75 (0.71)	1.89 (0.47)	2.00 (0.49)	2.00 (0.61)
Stress placed on foster parents' couple/co-parenting relationship^b							
Not sure	5.5%	3.4%	5.6%	12.5%	11.1%	5.6%	--
1. No stress	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
2. A little stress	12.7%	24.1%	--	--	11.1%	16.7%	11.8%
3. Some stress	50.9%	41.4%	77.8%	25.0%	44.4%	50.0%	58.8%
4. A lot of stress	30.9%	31.0%	16.7%	62.5%	33.3%	27.8%	29.4%
Mean(SD)	3.19 (0.66)	3.07 (0.77)	3.18 (0.39)	3.71 (0.49)	3.25 (0.68)	3.12 (0.70)	3.18 (0.66)
Refer to relationship strengthening services^c							
No	76.4%	69.0%	83.3%	87.5%	77.8%	66.7%	88.2%
Yes	23.6%	31.0%	16.7%	12.5%	22.2%	33.3%	11.8%
Furthest distance they will travel to training^d							
1. About 30 minutes	60.0%	65.5%	66.7%	25.0%	50.0%	61.1%	64.7%
2. About 60 minutes	25.5%	24.1%	22.2%	37.5%	33.3%	22.2%	23.5%
3. About 90 minutes	7.3%	6.9%	5.6%	12.5%	11.1%	5.6%	5.9%
4. About 1.5-2 hours	5.5%	3.4%	5.6%	12.5%	5.6%	5.6%	5.9%
5. About 2.5-4 hours	1.8%	--	--	12.5%	--	5.6%	--
Mean(SD)	1.64 (0.97)	1.48 (0.78)	1.50 (0.86) ²	2.50 (1.41) ³	1.72 (0.89)	1.72 (1.18)	1.53 (0.87)
Use of Respite Care to attend training^e							
1. Very difficult	18.2%	17.2%	16.7%	25.0%	27.8%	16.7%	11.8%
2. Difficult	56.4%	44.8%	83.3%	37.5%	44.4%	50.0%	70.6%
3. Easy	25.5%	37.9%	--	37.5%	27.8%	33.3%	17.6%
4. Very easy	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Mean (SD)	2.07 (0.66)	2.21 (0.73)	1.83 (0.38)	2.13 (0.83)	1.89 (0.47)	2.00 (0.49)	2.00 (0.61)

^a In your opinion, how prepared are foster parents for the many aspects of foster parenting after completing IMPACT training? No significant difference by number of counties directed or by number of foster parents in county.

^b How much stress do you feel the foster parenting experience places on foster parents' couple and/or co-parenting relationship? No significant difference by number of counties directed or by number of foster parents in county.

^c Does your agency currently refer foster parents to services designed to strengthen the couple and/or co-parenting relationship (if the need arises)? No significant difference by number of counties directed or by number of foster parents in county.

^d In your opinion, what is the furthest distance that foster parents would drive to attend a training? Significant difference found by number of counties directed: F (2, 52) = 4.15 (p = .021); ² group 2 < group 3-4 (p = .013); ³ group 3-4 > group 1 (p = .008). No significant difference by number of foster parents in county.

^e How difficult or easy is it for foster parents in your county to use Respite Care to attend training? No significant difference by number of counties directed or by number of foster parents in county.

Meeting the Relationship Needs of Foster Parents.

What we know. The unique challenges and stressors that foster parent couples experience following the placement of a child in their home are likely to put a strain on their couple and coparenting relationship. Common conflicts experienced by foster parents include a lack of equal commitment to fostering, role ambiguity, lack of communication, and disagreement on parenting decisions (Orme & Combs-Orme, 2014). Negativity in the couple/co-parenting relationship leads to ineffective parenting (Cowan & Cowan, 2002), which compounds the stress already experienced by foster children.

Survey Findings. To confirm the perceived value and potential benefit of relationship enrichment training for foster parents in Georgia, we asked DFCS County Directors to share their thoughts about how helpful healthy relationship education may be for foster parents in their county. As summarized in Table 3, the overwhelming majority of DFCS County Directors agreed that providing healthy relationship education to married and unmarried foster parent couples could increase foster parenting quality (100%) and could increase foster parent retention (93%). In general, Directors felt that healthy relationship education training would be somewhat (31%), very (38%), or extremely (24%) helpful to foster parents. Last, DFCS County Directors were asked if their agency would refer foster parents to relationship enrichment training if it were made available. The majority (78%) indicated that they *would*, and importantly, as seen in Table 3, no one reported “No.” A few sample comments shared by DFCS County Directors include:

- *I think that the retreat idea is wonderful and I believe that we would have couples that would attend.*
- *I am excited that our agency is moving in the direction of truly embracing the entire family. The relationships of our foster parents matter.*
- *This training should be required for all foster parents as when applied effectively it would strengthen relationships and family functioning and would allow them to be resilient.*
- *I think that it would be very beneficial to provide some training regarding the importance of maintaining healthy relationships while fostering since there isn't really any discussion regarding this topic post IMPACT. Although families identify their support systems, these systems may or may not endure the challenges that can come with fostering. Re-focusing on the need to have healthy relationships, whether between couples or with significant others (support systems), should have a positive impact on foster parents' ability to cope and hopefully lead to better retention.*
- *For some foster parents, taking on new responsibilities comes very easy, but for others, there are issues with putting all the pieces together. I think it would be helpful for those who struggle with this and maybe even for those who do well most of the time.*

Implications. Overall, DFCS County Directors recognize the important link between healthy couple/co-parenting functioning and foster parenting quality as well as possible retention. As well, there is clear support for offering healthy relationship education training to foster parents.

SUMMARY

Foster parent couples may experience numerous unique stressors on their romantic and co-parenting relationship. Overall, the majority of DFCS County Directors recognize that foster parents experience these challenges and they believe that relationship enrichment trainings would be helpful in meeting the needs of foster parents. This pattern was fairly consistent, despite a few small (albeit significant) differences based on the number of counties that Directors supervised and the number of foster parents in those counties (see notes summarized below Table 2 and 3). Still, many Directors currently do not refer foster parents to services to strengthen their relationships, likely due to the lack of availability of such services.

The CARE for Foster Parents project aims to understand and then meet the relationship needs of foster parents across Georgia. Working in collaboration with UGA Extension, DFCS, and other state and local partners, our goal is to offer relationship enrichment trainings to foster parents that will promote the well-being of the entire family by teaching couples – *dating, cohabiting, engaged, and married* – how to build and maintain healthy partnerships, identify and manage stress that threatens relationships, and promote and support co-parenting.

Relationship education training will not address all the needs of foster parents, and it is not intended to serve as a substitute to existing trainings. However, relationship education will meet an unmet and critical need in foster parent training. Supporting healthy couple and co-parenting functioning is essential to family stability and the promotion of children's health and safety.

Table 3. DFCS County Directors' Views Regarding Relationship Education

	Overall Total (N=55)	By Number of Counties Directed			By Number of Foster Parents in County		
		1 (n=29)	2 (n=18)	3-4 (n=8)	<10 (n=18)	11-20 (n=18)	21> (n=17)
Healthy relationship education training could increase foster parent quality ^a							
1. Strongly disagree	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
2. Disagree	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
3. Agree	63.6%	62.1%	66.7%	62.5%	55.6%	94.4%	47.1%
4. Strongly Agree	36.4%	37.9%	33.3%	37.5%	44.4%	5.6%	52.9%
Mean(SD)	3.36 (0.49)	3.38 (0.49)	3.33 (0.49)	3.38 (0.52)	3.44 (0.51) ¹	3.06 (0.24) ²	3.53 (0.51)
Healthy relationship education training could increase foster parent retention ^b							
1. Strongly disagree	1.8%	3.4%	--	--	--	--	5.9%
2. Disagree	5.5%	3.4%	11.1%	--	5.6%	5.6%	5.9%
3. Agree	69.1%	65.5%	72.2%	75.0%	72.2%	88.9%	47.1%
4. Strongly Agree	23.6%	27.6%	16.7%	25.0%	22.2%	5.6%	41.2%
Mean(SD)	3.15 (0.59)	3.17 (0.66)	3.06 (0.54)	3.38 (0.52)	3.17 (0.51)	3.00 (0.34)	3.24 (0.83)
Overall helpfulness of healthy relationship education training ^c							
1. Not helpful	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
2. A little helpful	7.3%	6.9%	11.1%	--	5.6%	5.6%	11.8%
3. Somewhat helpful	30.9%	20.7%	55.6%	12.5%	38.9%	22.2%	35.3%
4. Very helpful	38.2%	41.4%	22.2%	62.5%	33.3%	55.6%	17.6%
5. Extremely helpful	23.6%	31.0%	11.1%	25.0%	22.2%	16.7%	35.3%
Mean(SD)	3.78 (0.90)	3.97 (0.91) ¹	3.33 (0.84) ²	4.13 (0.64)	3.72 (0.89)	3.83 (0.79)	3.76 (1.09)
Would refer foster parents to relationship enrichment training ^d							
Not sure	3.6%	--	11.1%	--	5.6%	5.6%	--
No	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Maybe/Probably	18.2%	20.7%	16.7%	12.5%	27.8%	11.1%	17.6%
Yes	78.2%	79.3%	72.2%	87.5%	66.7%	83.3%	82.4%

^a How strongly do you disagree or agree that providing healthy relationship education to married AND unmarried foster parents could increase foster parenting quality? No significant difference by counties directed. Significant differences found by number of foster parents in county: F (2, 50) = 5.88 (p = .005); ¹ group less than 10 > group 11-20 (p = .010); ² group 11-20 < group 21 or more (p = .002).

^b How strongly do you disagree or agree that healthy relationship education training could increase foster parent retention? No significant difference by number of counties directed or by number of foster parents in county.

^c Overall, how helpful would healthy relationship education training be to the foster parents in your county? Significant differences found by number of counties directed: F (2, 52) = 4.15 (p = .029); ¹ group 1 > group 2 (p = .017); ² group 2 < group 3-4 (p = .033). No significant difference by number of foster parents in county.

^d If there was an opportunity for foster parents to attend a 1.5-day, weekend retreat with other foster parents to re-energize their relationship and learn healthy relationship skills, would you refer foster parents in your county to attend? No significant difference by number of counties directed or by number of foster parents in county.

WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION?

During the past two decades, research on couple and marital relationships has significantly informed our understanding of what makes relationships “work” (i.e., relationships that are satisfying, healthy, and stable) (e.g. Fincham & Beach, 2010). While couples can interact in a variety of ways and consider themselves in healthy relationships, there emerges from research overarching patterns of interactions that are fundamental to building and maintaining healthy couple partnerships that strengthen and promote stable and life-long parental and co-parenting relationships. These core principles – patterns of thinking and behaviors – are described in the **National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model** (Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2013) and summarized in the figure. Relationship and marriage education teaches these principles, practices, and skills.

There are a range of curricula designed to teach couples how to build and maintain healthy partnerships, and research evaluating these programs has demonstrated positive changes in the attitudes, skills and practices of unmarried (e.g., Van Epp, Futris, et al., 2008; Adler-Baeder, Calligas et al., 2013), engaged (e.g., Barton, Futris, & Bradley, 2012), married (e.g., Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010) and re-married (e.g., Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012) couples. Relationship education has been found to enhance relationship quality over-time (e.g., Stanley, et al., 2006) and for diverse populations (Bradford et al., 2014).

To learn more about the model and Extension resources to support healthy couple relationships, visit <http://www.nermen.org>.



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