The Importance of Quality Foster Parent Training

4 CE Hours

NOTE: This course evaluating foster parent training is based on the writer’s research, opinions and experience. It does not necessarily reflect the views of Elite Professional Education, LLC.

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Learning objectives

This workshop is designed to help you:

1. Describe the history of licensed foster care and the importance of training;
2. Assess the impact that quality foster parent training has on children served by the child welfare system;
3. Analyze the role of licensed foster parents, including the ethical dilemmas to which they are exposed;
4. Facilitate the screening, assessment and licensing process required to become a licensed foster parent; and
5. Describe the elements of pre-service training and in-service training and identify opportunities for improvement.

Introduction

Children who have been exposed to various forms of abuse or neglect often receive supervision and services through the child welfare system. When a child’s family is not able to provide safe and appropriate care for the child, the child is often placed with a substitute foster-care family. With approximately 400,000 children in the U.S. foster care system, the existence and operations of the child welfare system as well as the quality of foster homes have been a concern of many citizens, lawmakers and reporters for many years.

As of September 30, 2012, there were an estimated 399,546 children in foster care. More than a quarter (28 percent) were in relative homes, and nearly half (47 percent) were in nonrelative foster family homes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

This concern has been amplified in several states after a number of incidents involving the behavior of former child welfare case managers and former foster parents and the recognition of a need to improve the foster care system. Though many have made a public cry for positive change in the foster care system, many also have retained the notion that the foster care system is in need of strengthening instead of abandonment (Behar, 1981).

Society has taken an interest in foster care and the removal of children from their biological families since the early 1800s (Behar, 1981). When the public becomes aware of child safety issues and the foster care system is discussed in the media, the general public tends to engage in informal debate and discussions about the system in general – usually unfavorably.

Poor management of the child welfare system over the last several decades has been a common theme of those with complaints. There are past documented accounts of organizational mismanagement and poorly coordinated methods of compiling child welfare data, which has led to further abuse and neglect of children within the foster care system (Evans, 1996).

Some experts argue that the elements of foster parent training are not nearly as important as the approach and the mindset to the training (Titterington, 1990), and they stress the importance of viewing foster parents as part of a professional team instead of as a client. They suggest that this approach to partnership and increased communication between the parties in child welfare cases can help increase placement stability and foster parent retention. They suggest that case managers will experience more time to focus on permanency planning instead of spending the majority of their time responding to crisis situations (Titterington, 1990).

Other research suggests that foster parent training is best accompanied by an increased monthly stipend for foster parents, which has
proven to increase the retention rate of foster parents. However, retention was the same for foster parents who received an increase without enhanced training and those who got training but no increase in stipend.

In addition to discussions and implementation of quality training for case managers who directly oversee child welfare cases, various states have begun to look at, revise and implement changes in their training cycles for licensed foster parents. Typically, states have used a mandatory training, background screening and family assessment process to determine eligibility to become a foster parent. This is commonly referred to as “pre-service” training. Before pre-service training was implemented, an overwhelming number of foster parents said they felt unprepared for the situations and systems navigation they would soon encounter. For some, even completing a pre-service training course to become a licensed foster parent has left them feeling unprepared and unsupported.

The problems associated with a lack of foster parent preparation are multiple:
- Impoverished foster parent and foster child functioning.
- Conflict among team members.
- Foster parent strain.
- Foster parent attrition.
- Foster placement disruption.

All of these potential outcomes have a detrimental impact on foster youth. Youth who enter the foster care system are removed from their homes for many reasons, but most often due to some form of child abuse or neglect. Coming from these stressful living environments, most foster children have psychological or social problems.

Finding it difficult to communicate their needs in a functional manner, children in the foster care system often lack adaptive coping strategies. Thus, it is not unusual for these youth to exhibit severe difficulty in adjusting to a new living arrangement. At the same time, they are forced to cope with separation from their families, friends and familiar surroundings, a traumatic experience even for a child who has not been mistreated.

Consequently, children placed in foster care often experience a multitude of disturbed thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with their particular neglect or abuse situation as well as the loss and grief associated with the move itself (Fahlberg, 1991, Martin, 2000).

In the absence of training, foster parents are particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding their roles, because foster parenting is a unique job with multiple responsibilities. Not only do foster parents need to understand their specific duties, they also need to know how these functions are to be carried out in a compatible way with other professionals. This is especially difficult because the foster parent role requires one to undertake and integrate both familial and agency tasks that span the private and public sector.

For example, foster parents are responsible for nurturing and coordinating the child’s emotional, physical, behavioral, social and intellectual needs across many systems, including home, school and community. They help develop permanency plans, facilitate contacts with birth families, and participate in court appearances. More recently, foster parents are expected to play a key role in the element of family engagement, serving as a mentor and support for biological parents. A lack of training in how to successfully act in this role can result in additional barriers to ensuring the well-being of the child as well as the parent, and may lead to ethical dilemmas.

Clearly, foster parent role preparation through training is vital, given the substantial and deleterious consequences of its absence.

Within the last decade, the two most prominent pre-service training programs used nationwide have been:
- Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting (MAPP).
- Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE).
- In recent years, new curriculum, such as Passport to Quality Parenting (PQP) along with others have been adapted by agencies who train and license foster parents; offering a more current approach with enhancements focused on various initiatives of child well-being, permanency, safety, and the importance of foster parent / bio-parent collaboration.

Some states also have implemented required and ongoing in-service training to provide guidance to foster parents on various child development topics and information or to inform foster parents about changes in the local child welfare system to ensure that licensed foster parents are providing the highest level of quality care for children in the foster care system.

In this course, we will explore the most widely used pre-service training and discuss gaps or opportunities for improvement in these training cycles. We will also take a closer look at how development of additional pre-service components and in-service training can benefit licensed foster parents, the child welfare system and the children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect.
Definition of key terms

**Adoption**: Adoption is a way of meeting the developmental needs of a child by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibilities for that child from the biological parents to the adoptive parents (Drews, Salus, & Dodge, 1979).

**Child protective services**: Legal intervention of child welfare agencies, ordered by the judicial system, in an effort to protect children and families from situations of abuse and neglect.

**Foster care**: Foster care is a protective service for families. Foster care usually means families helping families. Children who have been physically abused, sexually abused, neglected or emotionally maltreated are given a family-life experience in an agency-approved, certified or licensed home for a planned, temporary period of time. The primary goal of foster care is to provide safety and permanency, with every effort to reunify the child with the biological family if it can be done safely, protecting the child from a harmful environment.

**Guardian ad litem**: A guardian ad litem is a guardian appointed by a court to protect the interests of a minor or incompetent in a particular matter. State law and local court rules govern the appointment of guardian ad litems.

**Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting (MAPP)**: A pre-service training curriculum used in selection and preparation of foster parents. Several states use this training program, each differing slightly in topics covered, items specific to their own state, and number of MAPP hours required to become a licensed foster parent.

**Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE)**: A 14-step program used in some states for recruiting, preparing, assessing and selecting prospective foster and adoptive parents.

**Permanency**: Long-term, permanent and legal placement of a child with a parent, relative, guardian or adoptive parent.

**Physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect**: Physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect are defined by state law and typically have a number of indicators, suggesting the child may be at risk or has been exposed to these elements. Indicators are often determined by child welfare professionals, medical professionals and education professionals. In most cases, the judicial system must have a preponderance of evidence to support that abuse or neglect has occurred to terminate parental rights or at least evidence of some indicators so that the court may order the family to comply with protective services.

**Termination of parental rights (TPR)**: The legal ending of parents’ rights to their child. Various states have statutes that list certain requirements of situations that need to be met for the courts to consider termination of parental rights, including the current status of placement for the child, such as a foster home, adoptive home or a long-term relative or non-relative placement.

**System of care**: A coordinated network of community-based services and supports that are organized to meet the needs of children and families.

THE ROLE OF FOSTER PARENTS

When children are sheltered from their biological parents because of safety concerns and no appropriate alternate placement is available, such as a relative or non-relative caregiver, the child is placed into a foster home. Foster parents must complete an extensive training and assessment process to ensure that the individuals who are charged with caring for these children are appropriate to do so. This process involves a screening and orientation session, a pre-service course that usually lasts for 6-10 weeks and focuses on the issues that foster parents can expect to experience, and an extensive home-study and assessment process before becoming a licensed foster parent.

In the world of child welfare, opportunities for ethical conflict exist in many forms. One of the most closely monitored processes in child safety is that of foster care licensing and the expectations of foster parents once they become licensed and have children placed in their care. Foster parents are the most valued resource in child welfare because they provide a stable and loving living environment for children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect. Additionally, foster parents communicate and coordinate with several key players assigned to the child. They communicate regularly with case managers, child protective investigators, a guardian ad litem, the court system, service providers and the biological parents.

The elements of the foster care licensing process and the expectations of foster parents once they become licensed can create a great risk for ethical violations. The National Foster Parent Association has a code of ethics for foster parents and describes it as a public statement.
that sets clear expectations and principles to articulate basic values and to guide practice. (National Foster Parent Association, 2007).

However, the foster parent code of ethics is simply 18 guiding principles that appear to set a precedent of a nationwide acceptance of what the role of the foster parent is in the community. Unfortunately, the role of the foster parent cannot be adequately summarized into 18 sections, given the multiple situations they contend with daily as part of the child welfare system. In fact, the American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics is much more detailed and lends itself to appropriateness of topics or similar versions of topics that foster parents may experience.

Foster parents assume the role of caregiver of a child. At times, foster parents are not informed about the child’s history, or the child may not yet have disclosed all they have been exposed to. This places foster parents in a difficult situation and requires that they be sensitive to the child’s needs and aware of the trauma they’ve experienced.

In a perfect world, when children are removed from their biological parents, they would only need one foster parent (if a relative is not available) who would care for them and work closely with the family toward the goal of reunification. However, we know that families do not foster forever, and for whatever the reason is for foster parent attrition, a disruption in the placement or a lack of commitment from the foster parent to care for the child on a long-term basis can result in additional trauma for the child.

In a system that has become more sensitive to actions that result in additional trauma for children, child welfare agencies have made efforts to avoid that, such as reducing the number of placements for children and keeping siblings together.

Every time children have a change in caregiver, it is another loss for them, resulting in feelings of disempowerment and helplessness. These children have lost another person they believed would be there to care for them, and it adds to their already complex views and experiences of trusting others. When young people experience multiple changes in relationships, they tend not to trust, but also tend to reduce or stop communicating. They feel a sense of “What’s the point of telling my story again to another person who’s going to leave me?” Not wanting to be hurt again or relive traumatic events by retelling their story, they put up a wall to becoming open and vulnerable.

**Screening and assessment**

From the first point of contact, when a family who has an interest in becoming a licensed foster parent contacts a licensing agency, to the orientations that detail requirements and throughout the licensing process, people applying to become licensed foster parents are subject to a strict screening and assessment process.

Foster parent pre-service curriculum often refers to this as mutual selection, which is defined as the process in which the licensing agency is assessing family members to ensure they are the right fit for the agency and appropriate to care for children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect.

Simultaneously, family members are assessing the agency to determine whether they feel comfortable in moving forward with becoming licensed with this agency as well as assessing themselves and their own family dynamic to determine whether fostering is right for them. Potential foster parents must complete a fingerprinting process, multi-level background checks, employment references, personal references, health certificates, and a full home-study assessment that discusses every aspect of applicants’ lives.

As prospective foster parents are simultaneously completing foster parent training courses and completing all of the required documentation, including the extensive home-study interview process (which may take two to three visits by the licensing worker), the entire process can be overwhelming for individuals. Foster care licensing agencies must ensure that the assigned licensing specialist or an assigned foster parent mentor serves in a supporting role for foster parents so that individuals who may make wonderful caregivers for children in need are not overwhelmed and decide to end their efforts to help children just because of the complex licensing process.

**Privilege versus right**

Decades ago, many states supported the idea that the ability to become a foster parent was a right. But despite the great need for additional foster parents to care for children in need, becoming a foster parent is a privilege and not a right. Recently, more states have placed this exact wording, that “being a foster parent is a privilege and not a right,” into their state’s laws.

Some individuals pursue this role with the best intentions, to help children who have been exposed to abuse or neglect. Others may have ulterior motives, such as financial gain or a quicker and less expensive way to adopt a child.
This statement allows the foster care licensing agency the opportunity to assess the family and either accept or deny them as a partner resource family in caring for children based upon reasonable findings or concerns from the home-study and background assessment.

**Medical responsibilities**

> “Once these children are placed in your care, you should treat them as part of your family in every way ... but remember ... these are not your children.”

During foster parent pre-service training, these words and this idea are expressed several times. Some foster parents take this to heart, and not only take the child with them on the annual family vacation, but choose to transport the child to their medical appointments instead of relying on the case manager of the child.

While foster parents are responsible for ensuring that all medical needs of the child are met, their legal abilities are limited. They are not the biological family, and they have temporary custody of the child, which often creates difficulty for foster parents when they want to do what needs to be done for the child. Because the state is primarily responsible for the child, the court often must sign off on medication or surgical court orders if the biological parent is not available to provide consent or if the parent’s rights have been terminated.

**Ethical dilemmas for foster parents**

One ethical dilemma for foster parents and foster care licensing workers is when foster parents (who are expected to treat this child as one of their own) do not agree with medications prescribed to the child. Many foster parents and child welfare workers come from the mindset of “do what the doctors say because they are the experts.”

However, when foster parents express concerns about the way medications affect the child’s behavior or ability to think clearly and those concerns are dismissed by the doctor, foster parents may go against the doctor’s orders for what they consider to be in the best interest of the child. In addition, these actions on the part of foster parents may not be reported to the case manager.

In an account of a 2005 ethical conflict within the foster care system, Hoffman (2005) discusses how federal agencies investigated allegations of unethical drug testing on children with AIDS residing in New York City foster care. Foster parents reported in 2005 that children were taken from their custody by the Department of Children and Families after the foster parents made a decision to no longer continue medication for the child. Zeanah et al. (2006) conducted research on ethical dilemmas experienced with medication administration for children in foster care, both nationally and internationally, and expressed the great risk that is involved in the decisions made about medications for children in care.

This aspect of caring for children spans into mental health services as well. In 2002, the Child Welfare League of America called for mental health providers to be trained in placement issues and to strengthen partnerships with children’s caregivers, foster parents and biological parents to ensure their involvement in the child’s treatment (Molin & Palmer, 2005).

Previous research has indicated that an estimated 40-60 percent of the foster care population has displayed some form of mental health need, compared to an estimated 10 percent of the general school age population. However, without proper training, the medical and mental health system can be very difficult to navigate, and foster parents have traditionally received very limited training in behavior management, communication and conflict resolution skills.

The mental health problems evidenced by children in foster care can lead to further maladaptive outcomes, including failed placements, difficulties in peer relationships, educational problems, involvement with the juvenile justice system, substance use and the potential for participation in health-risking activities.

One of the most common ethical dilemmas for foster parents is the requirement to support the permanency goal for children in their care. Most child welfare cases begin with a goal of reunification with a parent within a minimum of nine to 12 months. During this time frame, an attachment bond is developed between the foster parent and the child in their care, making it difficult for the foster parent to see and understand necessary elements of the system that oversees the child’s case management case.

According to Rycus & Hughes (1998), foster parents can help strengthen and maintain the parent-child relationship by including the parent in activities and by supporting communication and contact through visitation. However, there are instances where a foster parent’s underlying desire or even a hidden agenda to adopt a child because of fertility issues can result in an attempt to sabotage a child’s case and the permanency goal of reunification in hopes that the goal will change to adoption.
This is a major conflict of interest that results in a negative impact on children as well as foster parents. If a child’s goal is reunification, he or she wants to go home to mom or dad and is being told by the biological parent as well as other child welfare professionals that in fact, he or she will be going home soon. However, if the foster parents’ true intent is to adopt the child, they may tell the child that they would like to adopt him or her into their family, setting the child up for emotional distress and setting the foster parents up for emotional distress and future issues of loss for both.

An additional conflict of interest is the opportunity for foster parents to positively or negatively affect the direction of a biological parent-child relationship and the direction of the case. Many foster care licensing agencies encourage foster parents to mentor and work closely with biological parents of the child in their care in an effort to encourage healthy family engagement. This places a lot of power and responsibility in the hands of the foster parents. Some foster parents embrace this concept well, but others take advantage of this approach to manipulate the situation, which often involves reporting false information to the child’s case manager or the court in an effort to benefit their own self-interests.

It is interesting to note that the National Foster Parent Code of Ethics only grazes this issue within the very brief principle statement in Principle 16, which states that foster parents will promote decisions that are in the best interest of the child/youth, promote safety, well-being and permanence, backed by Principle 9, which simply guides foster parents to support permanency plans (National Foster Parent Association, 2007). This is very subjective in that the foster parents’ opinion of what is in the child’s best interest may differ greatly from that of the child’s case manager, therapist, guardian ad litem or even the judge who will make the final decision on a permanency plan for the child.

**Foster parent pre-service training**

Foster parents are a very essential part of our community, providing temporary care for minor children who are not able to live with their biological parents. This usually occurs as a result of problems or challenges taking place within the birth family. The placement of foster care children is intended to be a temporary living situation; however, that living arrangement can go on for extended amounts of time, or even indefinitely, depending on the circumstances of the child and the foster parents.

The goal of foster care is to reunify children with their parents, guardian, or with a suitable permanent placement, which may occur as a relative or non-relative placement. Child welfare agencies take great efforts to ensure that the child’s best interest remains paramount at all times. Foster parents are able to enhance and make a difference in a child’s life; help children and their families through difficult periods; provide long-lasting guidance and care to help children grow and mature; and learn and develop new parenting skills to meet the diverse needs of each child.

Each state mandates a specific number of hours of required training by a state-approved curriculum and certified trainer before a family or individual can be considered for licensing as a foster parent. The number of hours varies from state to state.

While the list of approved pre-service training curriculum also varies from state to state, the two most widely used versions are the Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting (MAPP) and Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE).

However, despite the widespread implementation of foster-parent training, the evidence base for MAPP and PRIDE has been evaluated as “very sparse,” and in a national search conducted in 2007 only six studies could be found that truly evaluated the effectiveness of these training programs. Of those studies, it was concluded that neither improved the foster parents’ behavior management skills, attitudes or psychological functioning, nor did it enhance the foster children’s psychological functioning, extent of behavioral problems or their interpersonal skills.

Next, we will explore the elements of each program, including their benefits and areas of opportunities for improvement.
OVERVIEW OF MAPP (MODEL APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIP IN PARENTING)

The MAPP program consists of a series of 10 meetings totaling 30 classroom hours. In addition to classroom hours and homework, there are required signature documents and tasks, such as Live Scan fingerprints, sanitation inspection and radon testing, that need to be completed outside of the classroom. Near the completion of the MAPP course, assigned licensing counselors work with prospective foster families to complete the necessary tasks and documentation required for the licensing file. This includes the completion of the home study and licensing process.

The MAPP program is widely accepted for foster parent licensure in several states and is designed to span all possible ages of children in foster care. However, it does not provide any training for specific age groups of children. MAPP primarily concentrates on scenarios for children who range within the ages 5 to 12. There are no modules specifically designed for training foster parents on infant care and services and no related training on services for teenagers transitioning into adulthood.

In July of 2000, a study commissioned by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) and completed by the Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy Mothers and Babies indicated that MAPP training needed to be modified to include an emphasis on the types of problems foster parents are likely to experience during their direct care of the child (Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center, 2000). As part of the findings, the department stated it recognized that the MAPP training needed revision and that the process of this revision had begun (Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center). As a result, MAPP was updated in 2002, adding two modules on behavior management.

Though recent enhancements have been discussed in conference calls and seminars between the Department of Children and Families and individuals employed by private agencies contracted through DCF, no recent official revisions have occurred. The lack of attention given to infants and teenagers alone, two groups of our society’s most vulnerable citizens, suggests that many issues connected to child welfare are not addressed properly for prospective caregivers who will soon be responsible for their care.

Every state has its own standards for licensing of foster homes, and different requirements must be met to ensure the safety of our most vulnerable population. Some require specific training and certification in child safety and development issues. For example, while CPR and first aid are required to obtain a foster care license in some states, they are not required by others. Research based upon these issues of child welfare foster parent training could result in the development of a more enhanced training for prospective foster parents, giving more attention to topics that are essential to their future roles.

Assessment of MAPP

MAPP provides participants with an understanding of child safety, but it does not provide the prospective parents with the enhanced parenting skills, techniques and understanding of system operations of child welfare that are necessary for the foster parent to feel comfortable and confident in their roles and responsibilities and provide appropriate care to children placed in their custody.

Although research has been completed on foster care in general, the focus is rarely on foster parent training programs, and the specific MAPP pre-service training for foster parents appears in research even less. Little attention has been given to this training curriculum, despite the importance of the child welfare system, the training of foster parents within that system, and the severity of the consequences if those individuals are not trained appropriately.

Much of past research conducted on the MAPP foster parent training program indicates that the program is ineffective as a training program. One area specifically targeted in past research is the issue of training parenting skills (Puddy and Jackson, 2003). Parenting one’s own biological children is much different than parenting children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect, which results in the need for an increased focus on providing prospective foster parents the tools to effectively deal with behavioral issues (Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center, 2000).

The MAPP curriculum and activities lead instructors to spend a considerable amount of time processing the effects of attachment and bonding and how it relates to the prospective foster parents’ own families and their past experiences, rather than providing a learning experience that will affect the experiences they will encounter as foster parents.

Puddy and Jackson (2003) examined the effectiveness of MAPP on teaching prospective foster parents parenting skills. Parents were tested in three areas: assessing goals of the training, assessing objectives of the training, and assessing parenting skills necessary to provide for the needs of children in foster care.

When comparing foster parents who completed MAPP and a control group of foster parents who had not completed any training, the
results indicated that the MAPP training program did not adequately prepare foster parents in the areas the curriculum was designed to, nor did the training provide them with the tools for effectively dealing with behavioral concerns of children placed in their care. This research indicates that MAPP is better utilized as a “decision tool,” helping individuals decide whether they would like to become foster parents (Puddy & Jackson, 2003).

A study conducted specifically on MAPP as used in Massachusetts looked at the foundation of the MAPP program and its theoretical basis to assess whether MAPP is grounded in psychological theory or specifically attachment theory. Results indicated that MAPP does not possess sufficient theoretical groundwork and empirical support of its contents for a parent training program (Richardson, 2001).

**CURRENT TOPICS INCLUDED IN MAPP CURRICULUM**

**Module one**

Meeting one of MAPP is simply titled, “Welcome to the Program.” This module acquaints leaders and participants with the group preparation and selection program as well as with each other. The process of foster care, adoption and permanency planning are discussed, as well as the roles of foster parents and adoptive parents. The overall theme focuses on strengths and needs, and the idea of 12 skills for successful fostering and adopting is introduced.

**Twelve skills:** The 12 skills for success are referred to throughout the 10-week MAPP training course, and allow participants to begin assessing their own strengths, needs and expectations. The 12 skills suggest that as a foster parent, you must be able to:

- Know your own family, boundaries and relationships.
- Communicate effectively with all parties involved in the child’s case, including biological parents.
- Know the children and assess their needs.
- Build on strengths and meet the needs of children placed in your home.
- Work in partnership with children and youth, biological families, the case management agency, and the community in an effort to support permanency for the child.
- Be loss and attachment experts to help children heal from situations of loss.
- Manage behaviors through appropriate discipline strategies and behavioral tools and techniques.
- Help children and youth maintain and develop relationships that support connections to their pasts.
- Help children and youth build a positive self-concept and positive family, cultural and racial identity.
- Keep children and youth physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually/morally safe and healthy in your home.
- Fully assess the ways fostering will affect your own family.
- Make an informed decision of your own ability to successfully foster.

In week one, there is also a “matching” activity, which divides participants into two groups: (a) foster or adoptive parents and (b) children in need of a temporary or permanent family. Participants are given cards that state descriptions such as, “I am a 16-year-old girl in foster care and I am pregnant; I need a foster home that is willing to work with both me and my baby” and “I am a foster mother who is able to care for infants with severe medical needs or developmental disabilities because of my medical background.”

At the end of the activity, there should be one or two individuals who did not find a match, or really had to stretch their needs or abilities to make a match with another individual. Those non-matched participants are then asked how it made them feel to not have an appropriate match, which is symbolic of what occurs daily within the nation’s foster care system (Florida Department of Children & Families, 2002).

Overall, module one is a fair introduction to the 10-week training course. However, it is not a good introduction to the foster care system. There are two topics that are not adequately covered, which may leave participants confused and uninformed. MAPP does not provide a quality overview of the foster care/dependency system. There is a one-page summary of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (Public Law 96-272), enacted in 1980, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (AFFA) (Public Law 105-89), enacted in 1997. There are no explanations of how the system works, how a child welfare case is initiated, who the key players are in ensuring child safety, and no identified goal for why foster parents do what they do or goal for the future of children in care.

Another issue that deserves some attention in module one is preparedness. Newly licensed foster parents are often unprepared mentally, financially, and in the home environment. There are many adjustments that a family must make in order to be successful in their role as foster parents. Discussions ensuring that families are prepared in these three aspects of life could easily be tied into skill No. 1 of the 12 core skills for foster parents. However, as it is written in the curriculum, these elements are not discussed.
Foster parents need to have an understanding of how having an additional child or children in their care will impact them financially. Of course, there is a monthly room and board rate provided by the state, but this amount does not cover all expenses for the needs of the child. For many, the added expense of additional food in the house is something they do not consider until the child is actually placed in their care.

Foster parents are also expected to have transportation available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to transport children to appointments and in the event of an emergency. This is a licensing requirement in most states. Prospective foster parents who are assuming that public transportation is adequate to meet all situations need to be informed of these requirements upon the onset of the training, as opposed to at the point of licensing.

Having information on the expectations and requirements of the home environment in order to meet safety needs and pass the required sanitation inspection would be highly beneficial to prospective foster families. The MAPP curriculum does not provide suggestions and requirements for the home setting and it is typically left to the licensing counselor to verbally explain the requirements during a home visit. Helping the participants feel prepared early on in the training course enables the participants to meet their requirements as well as feel a sense of partnership with the licensing agency instead of feeling uninformed of expectations.

Module one would also benefit from a section devoted to explaining terminology participants will encounter throughout the curriculum and activities. These definitions are provided in module eight, adding to concerns of the MAPP curriculum’s structure and functionality. Having this understanding early in the process may truly help participants make sense of the material they are given.

**Module two**

The second module of MAPP is “Where the MAPP Leads: A Foster Care and Adoption Experience.” This section details an overview of the foster care and adoption experience through the eyes of children, biological parents, foster parents, adoptive parents and child welfare professionals. Through the use of role-play activities and debriefing discussions, the trainer attempts to explain how families involved in the child welfare system are separated and possibly reunified; how permanency for the child may take place through the process of adoption; and how older youth involved in child welfare can become involved in the independent living program.

Module two discusses the removal and placement process for children and then gives a slight nod to procedures for situations of a missing or runaway child before delving into a discussion of how parental rights are terminated. The expected initial response by a caregiver upon discovering a missing or runaway child is described in less than half a page within the MAPP curriculum. Yet the number of runaway youth in our nation continues to increase, with a large number of these runaways being teens in foster care and female teenagers being more likely to run than males (National Runaway Switchboard, 2007).

There is a vast amount of research and information on how individuals, families and professionals working with youth can identify warning signs of a potential runaway situation and much information on the suggested tools and techniques that can help prevent children from running away and open doors of communication and understanding (National Runaway Switchboard, 2007). The MAPP pre-service training does not cover such information, nor is there a MAPP-affiliated in-service training for foster parents to be trained properly in this area.

The other piece of this module that relates to teenagers is the independent living section, which provides the MAPP participants with an understanding about services available because of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Enhancements are automatically necessary for this section, because the general independent living program is available throughout the state, although each district has services that vary in different training, services, and support to teens. Research indicates that this is one of the only segments of MAPP that is specific to teenagers in foster care. However, there are many topics and issues in today’s society that relate to teens, their development and well-being.

Approximately in 2005, additional attention started to be given to a concern within statewide foster care systems. Leaders from child welfare agencies began to realize that the system could operate differently to allow for more “normal” life experiences for youth in care. People began to hold focus groups and discussions with youth themselves and began to ask the question of “What can we do differently?”

Youth in foster care began to be included in meetings with legislators, and the voice of children started to become a priority. Within this effort, the concept of “I just want to have a normal life” became a foundation for how to implement change.

Until this time, teens in foster care were often unable to obtain a driver’s license, participate in after-school activities, obtain employment and engage in any type of dating situation without an onslaught of home studies and background screens. As such, the
The concept of supporting normalcy was developed and supported. However, this information was not added to foster parent training programs and for several years, only appeared as an enhancement if chosen by the agency providing the training. Yet, this information is important to understanding the roles and responsibilities of being a foster parent, and appears to be a natural fit to be matched with the material addressing independent living and teenagers.

The MAPP curriculum was developed before such changes in the system, and it needs to be updated with enhancements to showcase new developments in the foster care system. Without additions such as this, MAPP trainers are presenting an inaccurate vision of what prospective foster parents will encounter.

Case managers assigned to youth in care have been tasked with developing normalcy plans and independent living plans, which each incorporate the building of specific life skills to help them attain their goals. Some of the identified life skill elements include:

- Banking.
- Budgeting.
- Interviewing skills.
- Parenting skills.
- Time management or organizational skills.
- Educational support.
- Employment training.
- Counseling.

However, case managers cannot effectively implement this type of change and support without the partnership of the foster parents who are providing care for the child. Previously, foster parents had no guidelines of what was allowed and what was not, which led to fear of liability for the foster parent. Naturally, this impacted their willingness to allow a teen in their care to participate in normal teen activities out of fear they would be held responsible.

Fortunately, with the increased attention to this topic and effort, many states have written normalcy guidelines and expectations into their state laws that hold foster parents harmless if acting in good faith and with involvement and knowledge of the child’s activities.

**Module three**

“Losses and Gains: The Need to Be a Loss Expert” is the section of MAPP that focuses on the impact of separation on child development and individual growth. Areas that are covered include the stages and models of grieving, child development and signs of abuse and neglect, child losses, life books, and strengths and needs (Florida Department of Children & Families, 2002).

This module appears to correspond with the basic needs for foster parents to understand their roles as temporary families for children placed in their care who have been exposed to abuse and neglect. The detail and duration of the curriculum devoted to the life book is impressive. The life book is an essential ingredient in helping children understand and remember who they are, where they come from, and that those around them want to know this information about them as well.

Important to the development of identity, a life book is best used when a child comes into the foster care system – when the birth family history and culture as well as the child’s developmental history are more available – and is designed to be created with the child, not for the child.

Although the sources, contents and information to be included in a life book are clearly expressed in the MAPP curriculum, the effectiveness of this training presented in the third week of MAPP is questionable because there often are several months from when foster parents receive their license to when children are placed in their home. Perhaps this portion of the module could be covered in overview and incorporated into an in-service training.
Additionally, the life books are often designed for children between the ages of 6 and 12, leaving incomplete books for infants and toddlers, and leaving teenagers feeling that it is not age appropriate and therefore not wanting to participate in something that appears to be for younger children.

**Module four**

The fourth installment of MAPP is “Helping Children with Attachments.” This module leads the participants through information on how attachments are formed, along with the special needs of children in foster care. This section starts out strong, with an introduction and discussion of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Erikson’s Stages of Development. Next, the class is divided into groups and assigned a case study to review and discuss which targets the strengths and needs of children in foster care, biological families, foster parents and child welfare workers.

In the packet of class material given to participants, there are two pages on separation behaviors and symptoms. The chart claims to list behaviors or symptoms that are affiliated with attachment disorder, attention deficit disorder (ADD) and fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). The packet also includes several informational pages on drug-exposed infants. Much like previous discussion on teens, the MAPP curriculum appears to be limited on the amount of information on infants as well as the overall amount of child age-specific training provided to prospective foster parents.

**Module five**

Meeting five is one based upon the behavioral component. It is entitled, “Helping Children Learn to Manage Their Behaviors – Part I.” It provides tools and techniques for managing behavior of children, offers alternatives to physical punishment, and discusses the expectations of foster parents when dealing with discipline. Because many prospective participants feel that they already know successful methods to deal with behaviors, they are reminded that they may have raised wonderful children of their own, but that these are not their biological children. These are children involved in the foster care system, children who have been exposed to abuse or neglect.

**Module six**

This piece of MAPP is Part II of “Helping Children Learn to Manage Their Behaviors.” It picks up where meeting five left off, addressing what is considered “junk behavior” and how to appropriately ignore it, as well as techniques of the “stay close” tool. Stay close encourages parents to stay within arm’s reach of the child; use appropriate supportive touch (i.e. hug, pat on back); use appropriate facial expressions, tone of voice and body language; to use open-ended questions; ignore junk behavior; display active listening techniques; be empathetic; and avoid coercion and punishment.

Many child welfare experts argue that two 1.5-hour classes on how to effectively manage a child’s behavior and how to use positive interactions and reinforcement do not adequately meet the need for foster parents. However, some agencies, recognizing that this brief training could not cover every type of situation the prospective foster parent may encounter, have built in programs that serve as on-going support. Through these, foster parents can access a professional for advice via telephone around the clock (similar to that of a crisis line).

**Module seven**

Module seven of this program focuses on “Helping Children with Birth Family Connections.” It incorporates information on three federal acts that have highly impacted the foster care system: the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA), and MEPA’s amendment, Interethnic Placement of 1996. Though briefly discussed in the participants’ and trainers’ guide, MAPP instructors often use additional handouts to supplement the information and provide a clear picture of what these acts mean to children and foster parents.

This meeting also spends a considerable amount of time on the issue of how children’s cultures and ethnic backgrounds help create their
identity and the importance of supporting differences in culture. The topic of visitation with the birth family is also discussed. However, the focus on visitation with the birth family is limited and does not reflect the true family engagement and team-based partnership approach that many child welfare agencies have recently come to embrace.

There is no discussion of mentoring biological parents, how to build successful relationships with biological parents for the benefit of the child and to help to build safe, healthy and resourceful families.

**Module eight**

“Gains and Losses: Helping Children Leave Foster Care” is the session that addresses the reunification process with the biological family. It also covers alternatives to reunification as a case goal, which include long-term foster care, guardianship, long-term relative or non-relative placement, and independent living.

The course material for this week includes a four-page document that provides definitions of terminology frequently used in the child welfare system. However, this information is not presented as a review to ensure that prospective foster parents are retaining information provided to them in earlier modules. Although a useful document, it would be more practical to introduce these terms within the first or second week of the MAPP curriculum. By this module, participants have been involved in weekly group discussions and activities that revolve around such terms. Presenting this information earlier would provide participants with a better understanding of what they are discussing.

**Module nine**

In week nine, participants are led through “Understanding the Impact of Fostering or Adopting.” Classroom materials and discussions are based upon how adding a child to your family can impact your own pre-existing relationships with a spouse, biological children, relatives, friends, employment, income and family activities. Participants are often asked to share their own opinions of expectations, boundaries, rules, roles and family communication. They are led through skits and asked to identify the characters’ strengths, needs and what they might be feeling in their situation. Each participant is asked to create an eco-map, which is a drawing and representation of existing relationships and support systems. Various lines connecting the variables indicate strong or weak relationships or support.

Much of this week’s material hints at the idea of preparation, though never truly dives into the real issues foster families often experience. As discussed above about module one, preparation topics are not accurately covered in MAPP. Additionally, what information is provided in module nine could easily be incorporated into an enhanced version of module one, allowing participants to gain a better understanding of the bigger picture of fostering as opposed to waiting until week nine to discuss preparation and their own strengths, needs and support systems.

**Module 10**

The final installment of the MAPP foster parent training program is entitled, “Endings and Beginnings.” Coverage is given to the importance of foster parents as partners in permanency planning, specifically to the importance of foster parents reporting any educational, medical and developmental problems for the child. Observations of age-specific issues are noted in this section, although no information on the behaviors is given.

Behavioral concerns listed in the curriculum and suggested to be shared with case managers include: bed-wetting, lying, stealing, self-harm, overeating or not eating, depression and sadness, denial of feelings, inability to follow directions, fears and nightmares, and use of drugs or alcohol. Discussion also includes suggestions of observing the child’s interactions with others in the home, in school, and their comments about and with the birth family during visitation. While these topics are mentioned, there is no information on how to respond to these situations or any explanation of what certain behaviors may be related to.

This section is very limited and appears to exist primarily to encourage group discussion on such topics. Module 10 is fine as an overview or an outline, but could be developed to specifically discuss in detail those topics that have been mentioned within the module’s curriculum. This researcher feels this section is poorly developed and ironically can be portrayed by a group activity entitled “Pit Crew” that is included in the MAPP Leader Guide for module 10. In this activity, the MAPP instructor dispenses six tasks to six volunteers. Their tasks are written on individual cards, which are kept secret from the other volunteers and the class. The activity is designed to show an imaginary pit crew and driver working together to try to win the million-dollar prize.
The end result is often one of confusion and the inability to achieve the goal because of a lack of proper information and instruction. This activity is designed to represent the importance of permanency planning and the roles of all involved. However, this activity also represents what can happen when inadequate information and training is provided and quality implementation is expected.

**Additional resources**

MAPP incorporates the use of video to supplement the training on state law, policies and procedures and teach participants about child safety and permanency. Topics such as the Child Welfare Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), and the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) are explained in the videos. Though most federal and state laws do not change on a regular basis, which allows videos to be used for several years, there is a lack of media resources for updated state administrative code and protocol. Scenarios such as the normalcy policy are often distributed by e-mail to organizations responsible for the training and licensing of foster homes. Once distributed, this information may or may not be appropriately shared with participants of MAPP.

Another element of the weekly MAPP classes is the assigned homework. Each module has specific homework designed around the most recently covered topics. The expectation is that prospective foster families will complete this assigned homework and submit it to the MAPP instructor at the very next class. In a traditional pre-service training, this time period would be one week, and if the participants are a married couple, the husband and wife are both required to submit their own homework to ensure a level of commitment by both partners in the class.

The effectiveness of the weekly homework is highly debatable. First, if the MAPP curriculum is solely being used as a selection tool and not as comprehensive foster parent training, then the weekly homework may be a good indicator of the level of commitment by the participant, and their questions may be an excellent means of evaluating their understanding of the material.

However, if one approaches MAPP as “training,” this method is not favorable. The participants turn in their homework at the beginning of each class. Often, there is no discussion within the class about the homework, bridging their out-of-class efforts to their group involvement. This is primarily due to the length of homework assignments and lack of time to cover the curriculum of the pending module without having to go backward and revisit previous material in depth. MAPP instructors or licensing counselors are expected to review the homework, though the level of such assessment varies throughout the state.

The content of foster parent training provided by MAPP provides a fair overview of what children in foster care experience. However, the curriculum does not provide enough information to MAPP participants on the structure and functions within the foster care system. This researcher considers the MAPP curriculum to be informational in topics of attachment, bonding, gains, loss, strengths and needs, although the material is not presented in a functional manner.

**Foster parent in-service and MAPP**

In-service training refers to the training that foster parents may be expected to complete as part of their annual re-licensing process and the concept that foster parents are expected to be lifetime learners to provide the best possible care for children involved in the system.

A major concern about MAPP’s pre-service curriculum is that certain topics on a diverse group of children are not incorporated. Without the existence of or development of specialized training, foster parents are not getting what they truly need.

Some of the specific areas of concern include:

- Age-specific topics are not covered appropriately.
- Foster parents who are being licensed for taking infants into their home may not have had any previous experience with caring for infants, let alone infants who may have developmental or medical needs or who have been exposed to substance abuse during the biological mother’s pregnancy.
- Children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect can experience a variety of behavioral, physical, mental and developmental difficulties (Child Welfare League of America, 2009).
- Infants who may have been exposed to substance abuse can cause medical or behavioral concerns.
- Teenagers placed into care may display behaviors associated with running away. Recent data on runaway youth indicates that additional programs and training may need to be developed to address teen females (National Runaway Switchboard, 2007).

MAPP does not discuss these issues in detail, and foster parents are often left feeling helpless. Such feelings often lead foster parents to request the removal of children from their home because they feel they do not have the abilities to effectively deal with certain situations, nor is there a system of support to which they can turn to obtain these tools. This situation can then result in two negative possibilities: 1)
lower placement stability for children in care, and 2) the voluntary closure of foster homes because they feel they cannot successfully provide what is requested of them.

The structure of the MAPP curriculum presents a problem as well. Topics within the MAPP curriculum are covered in nonchronological order, which may create confusion for participants. For example, module two of MAPP discusses removal and placements of children and then continues into a section on independent living for teen youth. Discussions of independent living for children who are turning 18 years of age while in foster care would be better suited for inclusion within a module dedicated to permanency, toward the later weeks of training to fall within a chronological time frame of when situations occur.

As discussed previously, MAPP does not provide an explanation of the foster care system structure, nor does it provide an early opportunity to understand definitions of key terminology. A training program that expects its participants to effectively understand what their instructors are talking about when they are not given the proper information and overview is comparable to training someone to build a car engine without first providing a definition of what each part is, what it does, and an explanation of tools used throughout the process.

The other structural issue is provided to us through the review of a comparable foster parent training system called “PRIDE: Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education” (Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services, 1993). While MAPP does not include an in-service plan in its foster parent training, the PRIDE program contains 11 in-service training opportunities.

This added structure to the requirements for foster parents may increase the accountability of foster parents to obtain the training necessary to meet the needs of children in their care. Without the structure of an in-service program, foster parents have more options on training topics but less success in getting the training they actually need. Further research should be conducted to identify the top 10 or 15 training topics on quality foster care and helping foster parents feel comfortable in their roles and as partners with child welfare agencies. These training topics could then be developed into a statewide-accepted program of in-service training for foster parents, giving both foster parents and child welfare agencies more direction than currently exists.

Some agencies or foster parent associations turn to guest speakers to help acquire the required number of training hours for relicensing. These guest speakers may be experts on the topic they present, although many fail to provide the necessary link between information, knowledge and implementation specifically for foster parents. Through training workgroups that include foster families, topics can be identified on which issues foster parents themselves would like to receive training or more clarification. Although there is no structured in-service foster parent training, in-service hours are required for the re-licensing process of the foster home.

Many foster parents have said they rely upon local foster parent association meetings, which typically reserve an hour or two of each monthly meeting for training topics. In addition to random training and meetings, foster parents also can complete online courses at their own discretion and with the approval of their re-licensing counselor through websites such as www.fosterparentcollege.com. Training topics through this valuable resource include eating disorders, lying, sexualized behavior, anger outbursts, fire setting, sleep problems, soiling and wetting, stealing, running away, and self-destructive behavior. The foster parent college online is currently developing future training for coping with school issues, kinship care, navigation of the judicial system, reactive attachment disorder, mood disorders and ADD/ADHD (Pacifici, Delaney, White, Cummings, & Nelson, 2005).

Online learning opportunities offer a cost-effective alternative to live presentations for the foster care agency and offer flexibility to foster parents, who may not be able to attend offered training sessions because of schedule conflicts (Pacifici et al, 2005). Although advancements in computer technology have allowed this as a training option for foster parents, it should be noted that not all foster homes have Internet access.

**OVERVIEW OF THE PARENT RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION, DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION PROGRAM (PRIDE)**

PRIDE is a 14-step process to develop and support resource families that is currently being used as the primary foster parent training curriculum in several states. PRIDE has four major training components:

- Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE pre-service.
- Kinship PRIDE – A tradition of caring.
- Foster PRIDE core.
- Foster PRIDE advanced and specialized training.

**PRIDE pre-service** is a program for recruiting, preparing, assessing and selecting prospective foster and adoptive parents, and unlike
MAPP, PRIDE consists of a structured in-service component as well as a structured competency-building component entitled PRIDE core.

**PRIDE core**, an in-service training program for new and experienced foster parents, addresses the competencies required of all foster parents, regardless of the child’s condition or conduct.

**PRIDE specialized and advanced training** (Teens in Care: Supporting Attachment and Caring for Children Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence) builds upon core competencies to offer more comprehensive training in specific areas, such as working with teens or helping children manage anger. Although designed for foster parents, much of PRIDE core and specialized and advanced training will also be of interest to adoptive parents.

Integral to all three components is the belief that protecting and nurturing children at risk and strengthening all their families (birth, foster or adoptive) requires teamwork among individuals with diverse knowledge and skills, but all working from a shared vision and toward a common goal. Foster and adoptive parents are essential members of this team. They, like caseworkers, require preparation and training to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be effective members of the professional team.

The program’s philosophy fully appreciates and embraces the worth of family life for children; however that may be defined, as families today include a variety of types and constellations. PRIDE recognizes the need for foster and adoptive (resource) families to be knowledgeable and skilled in order to provide quality care, and assume their roles in an effective way. The curriculum states that resource parents, “like social workers, should be qualified, prepared, developed, selected, and licensed or certified to work as members of a professional team equipped to protect and nurture children and strengthen families” (PRIDE: Practice Handbook, 1993, p 1).

PRIDE pre-service, PRIDE core, and PRIDE specialized and advanced training are all designed to teach knowledge and skills in five essential competency categories for foster parents and adoptive parents:

- Protecting and nurturing children.
- Meeting children’s developmental needs and addressing developmental delays.
- Supporting relationships between children and their families.
- Connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime.
- Working as a member of a professional team.

**Assessment of PRIDE**

Foster parent training programs vary across the nation. Although the MAPP program does not provide a structured in-service training curriculum, one training program of interest does. The Child Welfare League of America and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services have collaborated on a training system for foster parents called “PRIDE: Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education” (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1993).

PRIDE recognizes that its nine-week curriculum is not all inclusive. In fact, the initial welcome letter that is distributed to new PRIDE participants states, “When you successfully complete Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE, you should be ready to become a member of the professional child welfare team; however, you will still have much to learn” (Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services, 1993).

Fortunately, the training program does not stop there. PRIDE offers a set of 11 in-service modules, which total 87 hours of training, with training sessions that range from 3-15 hours (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). This in-service structure offers training on such topics as developmental needs of children at risk, using discipline appropriately, developmental issues related to sexuality, sexual abuse, biological family relationships, working as a professional team member, cultural identity, permanency, and substance abuse (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1993).

While PRIDE has been implemented in more than 23 states, there has not been a national study that analyzes the effectiveness of the program and its impact on foster parent retention or child safety measures outcomes. However, some states have individually research its effectiveness, with positive results. Each of the studies conducted showed a significant increase in foster parent retention compared to retention rates before the program’s implementation and for foster parents who have completed the course and ongoing in-service training.

**PRIDE pre-service**

**Module 1: Connecting with PRIDE**

Session one begins with participants watching the video “Making a Difference,” which depicts how resource families work together with child welfare professionals to meet the complex needs of children experiencing out-of-home placement. This is followed by an
Module 2: Teamwork toward permanence
The second session begins by reviewing the importance of a child’s birth family and the role of permanency in their development. Next, the foster parent role and its many complexities are defined. In particular, prospective foster parents learn how to function as part of a professional child welfare team.

Module 3: Meeting developmental needs: attachment
Participants review the basic principles of child development and attachment theory. The importance of lasting attachments is emphasized, and prospective foster parents begin to learn strategies to facilitate attachment and bonding at various age levels. The content is disseminated through a variety of mediums, such as video, guided imagery and case vignettes.

Module 4: Meeting developmental needs: loss
This session covers the types of loss many youths experience before entering care, particularly how the separation from his or her birth family often intensifies the child’s grief. The stages of the grieving are reviewed, as well as how to best support children coping with related feelings. Participants are encouraged to identify how they might respond to such loss.

Module 5: Strengthening family relationships
The fifth class explores the child welfare goal to return children to their birth families whenever possible, and how team members may support reunification efforts. Also reviewed are skills to work with birth families, such as preparing children for visits and managing potential reactions upon their return.

Module 6: Meeting developmental needs: discipline
Session six addresses the use of appropriate discipline. This includes defining the construct and how it differs from punishment. Prospective parents are informed of the agency’s policy on discipline, and why physical punishment is not permitted. Participants learn methods to manage difficult behaviors typically presented by youth in out-of-home placements, as well as how to de-escalate crisis situations.

Module 7: Continuing family relationships
This session centers on the importance of lifelong connections for youths in care.
Specifically, participants learn skills that help facilitate a child’s permanency goals, and the process of concurrent planning. In addition, cultural issues and possible implications for youths experiencing transracial placements are explored.

Module 8: Planning for change
Session eight addresses how foster families are affected by fostering, and how to handle any reactions of various family members. Participants are informed about what to expect in the first few hours, days and weeks when a child is placed in their care, as well as some of the issues often encountered further along in the process. Finally, prospective parents begin to learn strategies on how to manage inappropriate sexualized behavior if exhibited by a youth in their care. Participants learn that this behavior often results from child sexual abuse and trauma, and are given instructions on how to best provide a safe and healing home environment for the child, all the while minimizing potential risks.

Module 9: Taking PRIDE: making an informed decision
Throughout the last class, participants hear from a panel of experienced team members including foster parents, family members and foster care workers. It is an opportunity for prospective foster parents to ask questions and hopefully deepen their understanding of the foster parent role so they can make an informed decision on whether to become a foster parent. This panel process has been mirrored by agencies using MAPP as well as other programs nationally, and while it certainly helps get answers to some questions and gain some insight about the key players in the foster care system, it might be beneficial to move the panel to earlier in the modules so that some of the role-playing and discussions may make more sense to some people.

Additional resources

“The PRIDE Book” (available in English and Spanish) includes all the resource materials for participants in the sessions and may be used as a reference at home after children are placed. The materials include worksheets for use during the sessions, a summary of session content, resource readings for the home, and worksheets that link the training experience with family assessment and the at-home consultations.

The 35-minute video “Making a Difference” (available in English and Spanish and in both VHS and DVD format) for use in session one, demonstrates the competencies essential for fostering and for adopting and explaining the differences between “making a commitment to be meaningful to a child’s lifetime and making a lifetime commitment to a child.”

The 35-minute video “Developing Family Resources” (available in English and Spanish) demonstrates family assessment strategies and how to incorporate family assessment with pre-service training.

The 35-minute video “Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE Program Vignettes” (available in English on VHS, in English on DVD, and in Spanish on DVD) portrays 20 situations in the placement process to promote discussion and learning.
The 17-minute video “Family Forever,” developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, explains foster-care as a family-focused service and is intended to promote a better understanding of how birth parents experience their children’s placement. (Note: Although this video is not officially a PRIDE pre-service component, it is strongly recommended that trainers using PRIDE pre-service include this video in their training.)

**PRIDE core training (in-service training)**

PRIDE core consists of 11 modules of competency-based, in-service training. The modules, which total 87 hours of training, range in duration from 3 to 15 hours each. Each module includes a Trainer’s Guide and a PRIDE Book, which contains all the resource materials participants will use in the sessions and at home – worksheets, a summary of session content and resource readings.

Foster PRIDE core resources include:

**Module 1:** The Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children at Risk (12 hours).

**Module 2:** Using Discipline to Protect, Nurture, and Meet Developmental Needs (9 hours).

**Module 3:** Addressing Developmental Issues Related to Sexuality (3 hours).

**Module 4:** Responding to the Signs and Symptoms of Sexual Abuse (6 hours).

**Module 5:** Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Families (9 hours).

**Module 6:** Working as a Professional Team Member (9 hours).

**Module 7:** Promoting Children’s Personal and Cultural Identity (6 hours).

**Module 8:** Promoting Permanency Outcomes (12 hours).

**Module 9:** Managing the Fostering Experience (6 hours).

**Module 10 (CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE):** Understanding the Effects of Chemical Dependency on Children and Families (15 hours).

**Module 11:** Understanding and Promoting Child Development (3 hours).

**Module 12:** Understanding and Promoting Preteen and Teen Development.

**PRIDE advanced and specialized training**

Foster PRIDE advanced and specialized modules provide ongoing professional development for foster parents who have completed PRIDE core training. Advanced and specialized modules build on core competencies to provide foster parents with resources and tools to respond effectively to complex situations or issues when caring for children with particular conditions or life experiences. Adoptive parents will find the topics of interest, because this training addresses many issues common to both foster care and adoption.

Like the PRIDE core modules, advanced and specialized modules comprised one or more sessions, each of which is three hours in length. Each advanced and specialized module includes a Trainer’s Guide and the PRIDE Book of participant resources for that module.

The first four advanced and specialized modules are now available:

- Teens in Care: Supporting Attachment (6 hours).
- Caring for Children Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence (9 hours).
- Preparing Youth for Successful Adulthood (12 hours).
- Working Together to Improve the Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care (9 hours).

Several additional modules are in development, including helping children and teens manage anger and responding to teens’ high-risk behavior. Overall, PRIDE appears to offer one of the more structured and skill-building-focused training formats to provide foster parents with the tools they may need in their new role.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are a number of topics that have been identified as crucial to the process of child development, child safety and foster parenting, yet they are not included within the current curriculum. Many of these topics are age-specific, which could enhance foster parents’ understanding and abilities of issues they could encounter for children in their care. Other training topics provide information on the child welfare system, resulting in a stronger understanding of safety, policy, procedures, expectations and available resources.

The first topic not discussed in the foster parent training curriculum, though it is a requirement for employees of many organizations, is the
risk of blood-borne pathogens. A standard addressing preventing exposure to blood-borne pathogens is targeted primarily at health care workers and related professionals, but blood-borne pathogen training is currently not being provided to foster parents as part of the curriculum – and foster parents indeed do risk to exposure to blood. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has a 24-minute video that explains how all workers can protect themselves from exposure to blood-borne pathogens, such as hepatitis B virus (HBV) and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2007).

Although the procedure for what to do when a child is missing or runs away is covered briefly in MAPP, there is no discussion of runaway prevention and response. This enhancement would allow foster parents to be proactive in identifying the signs that a child is considering running away and take the necessary steps to stop it from occurring.

Foster parent training programs have very little focus on substance abuse. Substance abuse is a major topic of interest for foster parents who work primarily with teenagers, and there are many foster parents who would benefit from training on how to care for substance-exposed infants (Burrey, 2003).

Other topics that are linked to behavior and have received substantial coverage in research on foster parent training include:
- Sexualized behavior and sexual abuse (Treacy, 1995) and how to respond appropriately to questions relating to sex (Craig-Oldsen, Craig, & Morton, 2006).
- Domestic violence.
- Verbal and physical aggression.
- Bed wetting and soiling.
- Fire setting and animal cruelty.
- Responses to mental health diagnoses such as attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and reactive attachment disorder (RAD) to best meet the needs of children in care.

Prospective foster parents typically do not receive training and information on these topics through the MAPP program.

There are also many topics on local policy and procedure that are not included in the MAPP pre-service training, but are viewed as important for foster parents. These topics include Medicaid application and policies; understanding the judicial system and court procedures; community resources; responsibilities (foster parent, case manager, child protective investigator and lead agency); an overview of child welfare and the dependency case process; procedures of approval for out-of-county or out-of-state vacations; and screened babysitter policies for foster homes.

Part of the problem exists because MAPP, PRIDE or other pre-service curriculum for foster parents are the main “training” programs for any individual interested in becoming a licensed foster parent or an adoptive parent, as required by a state’s department of children and families. It is referred to as “training” by statewide organizations, services and judicial systems. It is taught to participants under the banner of training instead of a method for agencies to select those who may be best suited for foster parenting.

In addition, the program itself is being used to fill a void in many states – the non-existence of an appropriate pre-service training curriculum that encompasses the special needs of children in foster care, policies, procedures, responsibilities and expectations within the foster care system.

In many states, the legal guidelines detail pre-service classes as a mutual selection process instead of a training tool. When potential foster and adoptive parents graduate from the course, they are viewed as having been “trained” and are often thrown into situations that have not been sufficiently covered during their classes. The misconception may be creating more harm than good, because we expect foster parents to transition from these classes to successfully meet the needs of children in foster care. In essence, this is a problem for both the state as well as foster parents, and begins in the structure of its existence.

However, by identifying the topics that truly need to be properly trained and by implementing changes in pre-service, in-service, or both, a stronger and more effective foster care system may be developed.

Although many foster families have successfully raised their own biological children, these are not their children. They are children who have experienced situations of abuse or neglect and have been removed from their families and familiar surroundings. Quality training must be provided to those who are entrusted to meet their needs and foster their development as unique individuals.

By identifying elements of foster parent training that need to be improved, we can increase foster parents’ level of confidence in handling certain behaviors and situations, which results in several benefits:
- Improved quality of care for children.
Improved lifestyle and relationships for foster families.
Improved placement stability for children in the foster care system.
Increased foster parent retention.

Foster parent turnover rates can also be affected by the enhancement of both pre-service and in-service curriculum, because additional training can lead to increased levels of comfortableness in their new roles. Long-term stability on the part of a foster parent is as important as placement stability in general. If a child is placed in a foster home and those foster parents decide to turn in their license within the first year of fostering, that child must then be removed from another home, put into an unfamiliar environment, and start all over again, which can negatively impact the child’s sense of security, safety and trust (Child Welfare League of America, 2002).

Foster parents can also benefit from additional training, especially on age-specific issues, to help them become more knowledgeable on how to respond to a variety of situations. As a result, they become more confident in their own knowledge and abilities, which can strengthen the bonds between them and the children in foster care. Many foster parents may have not experienced certain situations with their own biological children and may appreciate instruction by professionals in the field that make them more prepared as parents. The current MAPP curriculum does not provide such an opportunity.

Additional training also produces positive attitudes in foster parents and creates a positive environment in the foster home. This affects the interactions of all family members, and also increases the opportunity for improved social skills and psychological development for children in foster care (Reddy & Pfeifer, 1997).

Assigned homework that is typically affiliated with completion of the weekly modules of foster parent training is often redundant with group discussions and is considered by some to be ineffective and time consuming. Frequently, homework assignments submitted by families are not properly reviewed by licensing counselors before they are added to the applicant’s foster care licensing file.

Perhaps it may be more beneficial to consider the use of weekly reviews, designed to refresh participants’ memories, facilitate group discussion, and act as a bridge between weekly modules. For example, upon beginning class two, the foster parent training instructor could implement a three- to 10-question review that would cover information from the previous week. The group can then discuss answers and best-case practice for scenarios. The additional weekly group participation and revisiting material may be more beneficial to the adult learning process than individual homework assignments where no feedback is provided.

It is also suggested that a structured in-service training program be developed for foster parents who are “trained” in the MAPP program or any other pre-service that does not incorporate an in-service training component. Because foster parents often identify the age range of children with whom they would feel comfortable as foster parents, a training track could be developed for three different age groups of children typically cared for by foster parents.

One track could be designed for infants and early childhood. Another track would include elementary school-age children. The remaining track would focus on issues specific to teens and pre-teens. This targeted training effort could result in increased and improved abilities for foster parents. Because age-specific training would be identified for each track, an opportunity also exists to identify the training that would be beneficial to all foster parents, regardless of the age of children with whom they work.

This training would allow for several classes to apply to all foster parents, such as understanding and navigating the judicial system, Medicaid procedures, promoting permanency, creating a therapeutic environment within the home, and working in partnership with all parties involved in a case. Further research could be conducted to identify which training topics would be most beneficial to foster parents.

In some communities, licensing agencies have incorporated foster parents as certified instructors into their training. Others, however, have not developed this opportunity. Foster parents can add great insight to not only the material they are presenting but also add real-life experiences and examples to make the training process more meaningful for prospective foster parents. While agencies may have to make accommodations for these instructors to watch their children while they are presenting in the classroom, foster parents can be a very valuable resource in the classroom as well!

THE USE OF BEHAVIOR ANALYSTS

Some agencies have used a training cycle called positive parenting tools and techniques as either a pre-licensing requirement or in-service and relicensing requirement. These classes are often presented by certified behavior analysts to better prepare foster parents to understand tools and techniques for managing behavior often displayed by children in foster care. This requirement is not enforced throughout the nation, though it could be considered a useful tool for all foster parents. It is suggested that agencies that continue to use MAPP develop
this additional training in their foster parent pre-service training to provide them with behavior management tools before placing children who have been abused or neglected in their care.

Another suggestion is that module five and module six of the current MAPP curriculum be reevaluated. Modules five and six of MAPP address behavior management for children in foster care who have special needs. While it is suggested that the positive parenting tools and techniques courses continue to be led by behavior analysts, a certified behavior analyst isn’t needed to understand the concepts and techniques and to train others on the material presented in MAPP five and six. However, some states have written into law or procedures that mandate behavior analysts to teach these specific modules. The end result has at times forced agencies to hire behavior analysts to teach these two courses, adding an additional financial burden on the licensing agencies. Their MAPP training cycles and availability to the community may also be impacted by the availability of the behavior analyst.

However, demographics play a role in what training prospective foster parents require. One area may have a greater population that deals with substance abuse, while a small town across the country may not have a substance abuse problem at all in their community.

**An alternative training program**

While the information presented here has focused on two of the more widely used foster parent training programs, there is one additional foster parent training that is worth mentioning. It has just recently been produced and has already been approved for licensing purposes or is already being piloted in several states. The Quality Parenting Initiative: Passport to Quality Parenting program appears to take a more hands-on approach to the learning experience for potential foster parents.

The Passport to Quality Parenting program offers a unique approach from the two previously detailed programs and the difference is noticeable from day one – which is called “A Day in the Life of a Foster Parent.” On the first day of the program, prospective foster parents immediately meet with a licensed foster parent. This first experience is designed to give those considering fostering a chance to talk with an experienced foster parent about the rewards and challenges from his or her point of view.

Passport to Quality Parenting also incorporates field visits, such as attending a court hearing and sitting in on a court-ordered supervised visitation between a biological parent and his or her child who is currently residing in a foster home while the family obtains services. This type of involvement could be beneficial as an individual weighs whether to continue the process of becoming a licensed foster parent, as well as being a hands-on training and learning experience that in the past has not been offered by licensing agencies. One module even specifically highlights working with schools and child care, and another one deals with understanding the concepts and effort of trauma-informed care, both of which are topics that are greatly beneficial to new foster parents and have not been given attention in past pre-service training.

Overall, the program approaches each module from a family engagement and partnership perspective, with a focus on reunification. It includes discussions with biological parents, case managers, guardian ad litem, child protective investigators, and other key players to help prospective foster parents understand expectations and roles and to reinforce the idea that foster parents are not simply an isolated entity who provide care for the child while they are in their home. These foster parents can serve as mentors for the entire family and work closely with service workers and case managers to reach goals and make the experience less traumatic for the child.

**Moving forward**

It is important that we assess the needs of foster parents to provide prospective foster families with quality training, a sense of partnership in the system, and to provide safety, security and healthy development to children in foster care. Once the topics are identified, enhancements in pre-service and in-service training can be developed to meet such needs.

Agencies may consider developing, distributing and collecting surveys. While surveys should be provided to foster parents to gain insight about their perceptions of what additional training may be helpful for them, surveys should also include child welfare case managers or community partner service workers who interact frequently with foster parents to add insight on what they see as needed within the foster parent community.

Pre-service training curriculum is deeply rooted in attachment and bonding. Attachment and bonding is a great foundation for foster parent training, but children in foster care often experience a wide variety of issues far beyond just attachment and bonding issues. Foster parent training should address child-related, age-specific topics to provide high quality education to our foster parent population. By assessing the effectiveness of the foster parent pre-service training, we can better understand how to improve that training and improve or enhance foster
To accomplish a task, one must possess the right tool for the job. In the goal of training and licensing foster parents who feel well prepared and well supported in their new roles, the child welfare system needs a tool that is more enhanced than what it has been using in recent decades. The existing foster parent training may address techniques of selecting families most appropriate for fostering and provide a foundation for an understanding of child safety and the child welfare system, but cannot be considered an effective training tool. Previous research on foster parent training curriculum indicates there are areas of foster parent training that need to be enhanced or restructured.

The overall approach to any efforts to revamp the foster care system and make revisions to foster parent training needs to be one of partnership and treating foster parents as true community partners. When foster parents feel they are professionals and are treated with the respect of a real community partner and part of the team dedicated to ensuring the safety and well-being of children, they are more satisfied and more likely to provide longer care for children and to better support birth families.

Additionally, many resource families or foster parents discontinue providing care when the child welfare agency lacks post-placement response (e.g., given limited information about children without full disclosure, lack of communication by the agency, lack of in-home visitations) and clarity about the role and inclusion of the foster parent (Lutz & Agosti, 2005).

The Department of Children and Families in each state ensures that child protection investigators and case managers be trained in the roles and responsibilities of all individuals within the foster care system. They are trained to understand the child welfare system; the judicial system, its structure, policies, and procedures; and what to expect locally. This information is not provided to prospective foster families completing their pre-service courses. The amount of time and effort devoted to ensuring that foster parents feel comfortable in knowing their own roles, responsibilities and those of others involved in a child’s case helps foster parents feel they are part of a team. This sense of partnership is essential in the self-perception of foster parents and in retention of foster homes (Titterington, 1990).

A supporting report published by the Child Study Center reports that foster care agencies lose between 30 percent and 50 percent of their foster families each year because of lack of agency support, involvement and communication (Linares & Montalto, 2003). Furthermore, foster parents discontinue service because of a lack of resources and support provided by child welfare agencies, dissatisfaction with agency services and policies, and lack of training provided by the agency (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001).

The Casey Family Programs (2001) recommends that child welfare agencies provide competency-based, pre-service training combined with a process of mutual assessment for foster parent retention and the provision of accessible, competency-based, in-service training. The enhancement of foster parent training has several social implications. The most prominent is that with an enhanced foster parent training program, children in foster care would receive higher-quality care. Their needs would be met in a more timely fashion because foster parents would have the training, knowledge and abilities to address situations appropriately.

Foster parents themselves would also become more comfortable in their roles and expectations. When given an appropriate preliminary training program, foster parents may be more likely to maintain positive relationships with all parties involved because they perceive their role as a partner, rather than a client. Improved relationships with case managers, investigators, placement specialists, guardian ad litem, licensing and re-licensing counselors, and the judicial system affect the placement stability of children accepted into part of the foster family, lessening the chances of multiple placements occurring for the child (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002).

Additionally, these same positive relationships may also result in foster family retention. Without improved relationships, foster families are likely to experience burnout or have frustrating experiences within the foster care system, leading to problems within the foster home and possibly voluntary or involuntary closure.

Nationally, there are a number of foster parent training programs that exist, each with its own requirements, expectations and amount of training hours. Some of these training programs have success in a large group format and others have shown significant positive outcomes for displaying positive attitudes and parenting skills through in-home, one-on-one training sessions (Hampson, Schulte, & Ricks, 1983). Every state’s program includes information about federal laws on child welfare and its individual state laws. Demographics and specific local needs may play a role in the effectiveness of foster parent training, requiring each to be slightly different. However, if through additional research, one particular foster parent training program were to be determined as more effective in outcome measures (such as quality of care provided, placement stability, and positive perception and comfort level of foster parents) then that training program should
be used on a national level. There should be no reason why one state would implement a less effective model than another.

The child welfare system has in recent decades received much attention from society. Changes have been implemented. It’s important to recognize that many of these efforts have been successful, moving the child welfare system in a positive direction. Despite these efforts, further research and development is needed in the foster care system, to include recruitment, training, and retention of foster homes. According to Puddy and Jackson (2003), “Although past research has demonstrated that foster parent training can be effective in improving licensing rates and placement stability, to date few studies have effectively evaluated how foster parent training actually enhances parenting skills” (p. 990).

Though many researchers, politicians and social service workers agree that the current foster parent training system needs to be changed, no one has taken the time to identify what needs to be changed and how these changes would be implemented to best meet the needs of children and foster parents involved in the child welfare system.

Society cannot expect training components in general to be appropriate across time, as issues, systems, structure, laws, policies, procedures and best-case practice change continually. Foster parent training is no different. Minimally, the child welfare system should be responsible for providing a clear and well-structured training component that not only serves as a method of selecting appropriate temporary caregivers, but also prepares them for their roles and responsibilities. Through further research and development, the opportunity exists for a statewide and potentially nationwide foster parent comprehensive training program to provide quality to a foster system that requires much care.

References


THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY FOSTER PARENT TRAINING

Final Examination
Select the best answer for each question and then proceed to SocialWork.EliteCME.com to complete your final examination.

1. How many children are involved in the foster care system within the United States?
   a. Approximately 25,000.
   b. Approximately 50,000.
   c. Approximately 200,000.
   d. Approximately 400,000.

2. Some experts argue that the elements of foster parent training are not nearly as important as the approach and the _______ of the training.
   a. Timing.
   b. Mindset.
   c. Participants.
   d. Facilitators.

3. A lack of foster parent preparation can lead to:
   a. Impoverished foster parent and foster child functioning.
   b. Conflict among team members.
   c. Foster parent attrition.
   d. All of the above.

4. The two foster parent training programs most widely used in the U.S. within the last decade are:
   a. MAPP and ASFA.
   b. QPI and PRIDE.
   c. MAPP and PRIDE.
   d. QPI and ASFA.

5. MAPP training includes:
   a. Attachment and bonding.
   b. Age-specific training.
   c. An explanation of how the foster care system works.
   d. Detailed and focused instruction on parenting skills and behavioral issues.

6. The legal intervention of child welfare agencies, ordered by the judicial system, in an effort to protect children and families from situations of abuse and neglect is known as:
   a. Foster care.
   b. Child protective services.
   c. Kinship care.
   d. Judicial intervention.

7. One of the most closely monitored processes in child safety is that of ____________ and the expectations of foster parents once they become licensed and have children placed in their care.
   a. Foster care training.
   b. Foster care licensing.
   c. Foster care case management.
   d. Foster care recruitment.
8. The PRIDE training program components include all of the following except:
   a. Pre-service training.
   b. Core training.
   c. Advanced and specialized training.
   d. Trial licensing of potential foster parents.

9. The __________ is an essential ingredient in helping children understand and remember who they are, where they come from, and that those around them want to know this information about them as well.
   a. Life book.
   b. Case plan.
   c. Treatment plan.
   d. History book.

10. Some states have written into law or procedures that mandate the use of __________ to teach specific modules.
    a. Therapists.
    b. Behavior analysts.
    c. Licensed social workers.
    d. Foster parents.