



## STRENGTH-BASED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

WE'RE A "FAMILY"  
NOT A HOME



# REFRAME TO FAMILY ASSESSMENT FROM HOME STUDY

By Eileen Mayers Pasztor, DSW, Samantha Carter, MSW, Marcus Stallworth, LMSW, and Eshale Williams, PsyD, LMFT

**This series focuses on the words or expressions considered “strength-based” to help families, caseworkers and others involved in the child welfare system to strengthen how we describe the children and families impacted.**

Everyone who becomes a foster family knows that one of the steps between calling an agency to inquire about the fostering process, participating in preservice training, and having children join our families, is a process that is historically known as the home study. Did you know that the idea of a “home study” originated over 150 years ago?

Between the 1850s and 1920s, hundreds of thousands of European immigrant children were relocated from impoverished neighborhoods and orphan asylums in New York City to families settling in the new West, such as Ohio, Missouri and Texas. This was known as the Orphan Train movement. Townspeople were notified that trains filled with these children were coming to their town.

After the trains pulled into the stations, the children were lined up on the train platforms or sometimes marched to a theater stage for viewing, selection and distribution. In fact, the expression “up for adoption” still used today is a remnant of that process. The custodians of the children, known as “agents,” would give a brief description of each child — ranging from babies to teens. A local “home study” committee comprised of community leaders would approve the selec-

tion. The purpose was for the children to contribute to the families who took them in. Typically viewed as rescuing good children from bad circumstances, the Orphan Trains continued for about 70 years. Perhaps the sentiment that foster parents take children for the money may have derived from the experience of children contributing to households and farms. In fact, it WAS the older children who could help out who were selected before the younger ones.

In 1943, Dorothy Hutchinson’s book “In Quest of Foster Parents,” was recognized as an authoritative source for agency staff known as “homefinders.” The author wrote, “normalcy is something that is hard to define yet easy to see and feel.” Determining that one criterion for successful fostering was to be “normal,” a definition was proposed that “These people have made reasonably satisfactory adjustments to the demands of everyday life.” Such evaluative measures were reinforced by the “homefinder” being viewed as the “expert” and the focus was primarily on the foster or adoptive mother.

So why the change from “home study?” Over the decades, with the children’s rights movement, it became clear that fostering — like adopting — was not a service for adults

who wanted children, but a support for children who needed families. It became evident that there needed to be a change in focus from a study of the home to the strengths and needs for support for each member of the foster family. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, recruitment/selection/assessment/training programs such as the Nova Model (from Nova University in South Florida) to MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) to the PRIDE Model of Practice to develop and support foster parents as team members in child protection and trauma-informed care of children advanced such principles as:

- Changing the concept of the “home” being studied by one “homefinder” or “recruiter” armed with a list of questions to ask prospective families to “at-home consultations” to engage and empower prospective families in their assessment of their own strengths and needs to foster, making the process mutual.
- Using preservice training as a tool for mutual assessment; using information shared in the training to help families have candid, courageous, caring and committed conversations to discuss their abilities, resources and willingness to be team members in child protection and trauma-informed care of children.
- Demystifying the assessment process by making all the assessment components transparent. Prospective resource parents should know (1) the mission of the agency with which they will affiliate; (2) what is expected of them in advance of being approved; and (3) whether the agency is an excellent agency. (See *Fostering Families Today* March/April 2019 for the article “What Makes a Family Foster Care Agency Excellent.”)
- The dependability, accessibility, reasonableness and encouragement

of agency staff which will influence whether prospective families may be able and willing to select themselves into any foster care/adoption program. It is a significant and life-changing decision for all involved.

Of course there are licensing and safety standards and requirements for the actual home in which foster families live. In this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, assessments become more challenging. Every effort must be made to avoid the “place and pray” approach where children are placed like objects and everyone hopes there won’t be a 14- or 7-day notice disruption.

Families are systems; what happens to one member of a family happens to the others. Assessments must be mutual between and among all members of each prospective foster family. There also must be a cultural sensitivity perspective as well. The Child Welfare League of America refers to this as the “dynamics of demographic diversity.” This means that staff representing the agency charged with ensuring safety and well-being of children in their care and the families who come forward to provide round-the-clock care for children who have endured loss and trauma must assess — together — will this be a protecting and nurturing family? Despite diversity in age, culture, education, socio-economic ability, gender or sexual orientation, agency staff and the prospective resource families must be able to work together, as a team, to assess, not the home but the family.

As CWLA states, to be any type of parent — birth, grand, foster, adoptive — and to be a child welfare professional is a privilege and not a right; but for children to be protected is a right, not a privilege.

Look for another strength-based “reframe” in the next issue of *Fostering Families Today*. To share your ideas for more positive ways to talk about children and families, contact Eileen Mayers Pasztor at [eileen.pasztor@csulb.edu](mailto:eileen.pasztor@csulb.edu). •

*Eileen Mayers Pasztor, DSW, has been writing for Fostering Families Today for many years based on her experience as a foster and adoptive parent for now adult children who continue to need her support because of their unique needs. She is also a CWLA curriculum development/consultant; and professor with School of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach. Contact Pasztor at [eileen.pasztor@csulb.edu](mailto:eileen.pasztor@csulb.edu).*

*Samantha K. Carter, MSW, joined the Child Welfare League of America in 2018 as a training and administrative specialist. She can be contacted at [scarter@cwla.org](mailto:scarter@cwla.org).*

*Eshele Williams, PsyD, LMFT, is a trainer, consultant, professor/advisory board member, School of Child and Family Psychology at Pacific Oaks College; and consultant/curriculum developer for CWLA. As the birth child of foster and adoptive parents she has shared her unique perspective writing for Fostering Families Today magazine sharing research and recommendations. Contact Williams at [Eshele@att.net](mailto:Eshele@att.net).*

*Marcus Stallworth, LMSW, is the training and development specialist for the Child Welfare League of America, and board member of the National Foster Parent Association. He is a member of Connecticut’s Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team, and co-owner of Welcome 2 Reality, LLC, which provides media literacy education for students. Contact Stallworth at [mstallworth@cwla.org](mailto:mstallworth@cwla.org).*