



**Words Matter in Communicating and Building Trust\***

**Here are examples of strength-based words and expressions by list, narrative examples, and publications.**

**LIST**

CWLA’s (1) *PRIDE Model of Practice to Develop and Support Foster and Adoptive (Resource) Parents as Team Members in Child Protection and Trauma Informed Care of Children* and (2) *Kinship Traditions of Caring and Collaborating Model of Practice* each use “strength-based” words to emphasize treating children, adults, and families with dignity and respect.

<b>Instead of:</b>	<b>Consider using:</b>
Case	Child or parent or family
Home	Family
Hard to place child	Safe, nurturing families are hard to find
Up for adoption	Child is ready to be adopted or needs an adoptive family
Placed in a home	Joined a family
aging out of the foster care system	Being connected to a relationship that is safe, nurturing and enduring
Kinship Caretaker	Kinship Caregiver
Foster parent	Resource parent
Natural family or natural parent	Birth family or birth parent
Visitation	Family time
Home study	Family assessment
Home visit	In home consultation
How many placements can the home take	How many children can the family care for
Screening out or weeding out	Selecting in

<b>Children are removed or pulled</b>	<b>Children are separated</b>
<b>How many bed does the foster home have</b>	<b>How many children can join the family</b>
<b>Recruitment, retention</b>	<b>Develop, support</b>

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### **Narrative Examples**

Instead of:

1. Referring to children as placements, refer to them as children or youth.
2. Labeling children as hard to place, consider instead that families may be hard to find. Place the challenge on the adults, it is not the children's fault or responsibility that physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect led to their behaviors; "hard to place" blames the victim.
3. Referring to children as damaged (as in cars or furniture), consider that they are fragile or challenging.
4. Referring to children as being removed (like garbage and snow), consider that they are separated from their families (definitely do not use "pulled").
5. Referring to natural families (as if foster and adoptive families are not), consider that birth parents or families are just that - parents/families - and qualify all the others: foster parents, adoptive parents, godparents, step-parents, etc.
6. Referring to families as homes; it is not the home that heals or hurts children, it is the people living there that do. Replace home with family.
7. Referring to children as blowing out of foster care (as if they are tires?) consider that the setting or foster family could not meet their needs.
8. Referring to foster parents or foster families as homes or beds, refer to them as families (so instead of asking "How many placements will that home take?" ask, "How many children can be cared for by that family?")

Think of home as a four-letter word. It is not the home that heals or hurts the child, it is the family that lives there. Further, what affects one member of the family, affects all.

9. Putting children up for adoption (from the auction blocks or theatre stages during the orphan train decades in the 1800's), children are placed adoptively.
10. Making home visits to foster parents - since they are not clients - we have home meetings or home consultations with them.

11. Screening out or weeding out prospective foster or adoptive parents (or staff for that matter), people are selected in. (A screen is what is used to keep out bugs - after we are screened we feel strained; weeding means yanking and throwing in the garbage).

12. Referring to visits that children have with the parents, have relationship -building activities. The parents aren't coming for a visit - it isn't a social call. They need to activities to learn to build developmentally appropriate relationships with their children. Perhaps your agency can be creative and find a shorter way to say it. The relationship between the parent and child has been compromised. Trust must be rebuilt. This contact is the only way that parents can truly learn, practice, and demonstrate some competency around planning and management. Children should be reunited with their parent(s) when their parents can accept their responsibility in the events that precipitated their separation from their children. It is essential that they have regular opportunities to engage in relationship-building activities that are child and family-friendly, and developmentally appropriate for the child's age and stage of development. This means they must have considerable support from their caseworker/social workers and from the foster parent.

13. Referring to grandparents and other relatives providing kinship care as caretakers; they are caregivers (caretakers work in cemeteries).

**Person First:**

**What are your suggestions for other terminology or words that can be reframed to be child and family friendly, and strength-based?**

People-first language emphasizes the individuality, equality and dignity of people. Rather than defining people primarily by their identity, people-first language is an important distinction. Children in foster care or foster child? She is a diabetic, or he is a person with diabetes?

# Words Matter: A Strengths-Based Approach for Family Foster Care

- by [Guest Writer](#)
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The **social work profession** emphasizes the strengths-based approach, understanding that while individuals, families, and communities have challenges or needs (not weaknesses), it is essential to recognize the positives. These can be relationships, resources, abilities, skills, knowledge, and networks. In child welfare, strengths-based words and expressions remind us that we are serving children and families who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

In 1991, the National Commission on Family Foster Care, convened by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA), reinforced the importance of using strengths-based language. It reframed the previously used term foster family care to family foster care, emphasizing the importance of caring for children in families.

It was essential to respect the voices of former youth in care serving on the commission who had strong feelings about the words adults used to describe them and their experiences. They did not like to hear that they were removed from their parents and kin, because garbage and snow are removed. Instead, they preferred the word separated. They did not like to be referred to as damaged, like cars and furniture, but rather fragile or challenged. They did not like aging out of the foster care system or emancipating, as those are not words that most families use when their birth children move away or transition from home.

Later in that decade, CWLA published the *PRIDE Model of Practice* to recruit, prepare, assess, select, train, and retain foster and adoptive parents, now known as resource parents. This model reframes recruitment and retention to development and support. It also advances terms created by earlier foster parent training programs, such as having prospective resource parents select in rather than being screened or weeded out. Sharing a common goal and language is an essential component of a model of practice to help prospective resource parents at the beginning of their relationship with their agencies. Other words that matter include the following:

From “*Up for Adoption*” to “*Preparing for or Ready for Adoption*”: This comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century orphan trains movement. The newly formed **Children’s Aid Society** moved thousands of destitute, orphaned children from New York City to families in the Midwest. When the trains arrived in the towns along the routes, the children were placed up on the train platforms or theatre stages to be viewed and selected by the local townspeople, so the children were literally “up” for adoption.

From “*Home Study*” to “*Family Assessment*”: It is not the home that heals, helps, or hurts children, but the people living there who do. Those early foster parents who gathered around the train platforms or theatre stages to choose the “orphan train” children were approved by local committees comprised of community leaders such as store owners, bank presidents, and sheriffs. If you had good credit and were an upstanding citizen, you were approved on the spot. Now the home study has evolved to a family mutual assessment.

Mutuality implies that while the foster care and adoption agency is assessing the prospective resource family, the family simultaneously is assessing whether it wants to affiliate with the agency.

From *“Children Placed with Families”* to *“Children Joining Families”*: Children were described as being “placed”– from one family to another – as if they were objects. According to the *PRIDE Model of Practice*, children not only are separated from families but then they must be joined with other families and expected to stay for as long as they need to have those families keep them safe, nurtured, meet their developmental needs, and ensure permanency (connection to relationships that are safe and enduring).

From *“Hard to Place Child”* to *“Safe and Nurturing Families are Hard to Find”*: Prior to the 1970s, children needing foster and adoptive families were identified as dependent and neglected. With the increase in emotional and behavioral challenges, children began to be viewed as having special needs. “Hard to place” became a “convenient” label for children who were medically challenged, siblings, of color, and older. Hard to place is a “blame the victim” expression. It can never be that children are hard to place but, instead, families that are safe and nurturing can be hard to find.

According to the *PRIDE Model of Practice*, being any type of parent – birth, step, grand, foster, adoptive – is a privilege and not a right; but for children to be protected and nurtured, that is a right, not a privilege.

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