

DEVELOPING A PARENT-TO-PARENT



SUPPORT NETWORK





*Developing a Parent-to-Parent Support Network*

NORTH AMERICAN COUNCIL ON ADOPTABLE CHILDREN

*April 2009*



# ABOUT NACAC

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Founded in 1974, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the belief that each child and youth has the right to a permanent, nurturing, and culturally sensitive family. Our mission is:

*NACAC promotes and supports permanent families for children and youth in the United States and Canada who have been in care—especially those in foster care and those with special needs.*

NACAC's work encompasses four key areas—parent leadership development, public policy advocacy, adoption support, and education.

## PARENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- NACAC offers supportive services and leadership training to hundreds of adoptive, foster, and kinship parent groups.
- NACAC identifies adoptive parents who are potential leaders and helps them establish supportive services for their peers.

## PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

- NACAC advocates for child welfare policy and practice reforms that will help children and youth find permanent families more quickly and help families receive needed post-adoption support.
- NACAC communicates with Congress about the needs of foster children and youth and explains how the system can and should be improved.
- In discussions about reform, NACAC ensures that the voices of former foster youth, adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, and others directly affected by foster care are heard.

## ADOPTION SUPPORT

- NACAC provides information to prospective adopters, reminding them of the thousands of children and youth waiting for a forever family.
- In Minnesota, NACAC operates the MN ASAP parent network to support adoptive parents raising children who have special needs.
- The Adoption Subsidy Resource Center provides expert advice and information that enable families to obtain the medical and financial resources they need to raise children and youth adopted from foster care.

## EDUCATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

- Through the most comprehensive adoption conference in North America, NACAC educates child welfare professionals, adoptive, foster, and kinship parents, and others touched by adoption.
- Staff offer training to parents and workers on topics such as adoption assistance, parent group development, and transracial parenting.
- Through the NACAC website and by publishing the quarterly newsletter *Adoptalk* and other valuable resources, NACAC informs parents, child welfare professionals, and other child advocates about foster care and adoption issues.

For more information, please contact us at [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org), [info@nacac.org](mailto:info@nacac.org), or 651.644.3036. Staying abreast of current adoption and foster care issues can be difficult. NACAC provides information and connections to make your life easier as you help children and adoptive families.



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# INTRODUCTION

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Children from foster care often come to their adoptive, foster, or kinship families with feelings of loss for their first families. Many have experienced trauma, neglect, and abuse. Experienced adoptive, foster, and kinship parents understand how trauma manifests in children. They have learned how to provide safety, structure, and guidance, while offering an open and patient heart when their children continue to have trust issues or struggle with their feelings.

These children require parents who can accept them as they are, help them grow at their own pace, teach them how to understand and manage their fear and anger, deal with issues from their past, and become as self-sufficient and independent as possible. As adoptive, foster, and kinship parents take on the difficult job of raising children who have been abused or neglected, they need support.

Some of the best support comes from other parents. Formal and informal systems that encourage parents to help each other raise their children have worked for generations in countless communities around the world. When the network of experienced parents grows and the depth of their experiences increases, they are able to creatively solve parenting problems.

Experienced adoptive, foster, and kinship parents provide effective support to each other because they:

- have firsthand knowledge of the issues involved in parenting children who have been in foster care
- have instant credibility because of the depth of their experience in raising children with special needs
- are not intimidating so other parents are more free to open up to them

This publication is designed to help communities develop peer support networks for adoptive, foster, and kinship parents.

## THE NEED

Since many children from foster care have social, emotional, educational, and behavioral delays, surrounding them and the families that care for them in a network of support and resources makes sense. Looking at early research, a survey of families who adopted children from foster care in the 1980s found that 84 percent of the children adopted from foster care met their state's definition of having "a special need." The surveyed families also reported that 26 percent of their adopted children had a disabling condition. Families reported that:

- 58 percent of their children needed specialized health care
- 68 percent had an educational delay
- 69 percent exhibited misconduct
- 83 percent exhibited some other kind of serious behavioral problem<sup>1</sup>

Although most of the research examined adoptive families, much of what has been learned about raising children with special needs can be applied to foster and kinship families too.<sup>2</sup>

Even experienced parents need help from others. Children who have been abused or neglected, require parents who are flexible and willing to learn new parenting skills. Although these parents may have once felt competent and confident about raising children, they soon realize many of their former tried and true parenting techniques don't work and they need help from other foster, adoptive, or kinship parents.

## THE VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT

Research has shown that parents benefit from the support of other adoptive, foster, and kinship parents. Although much of the research focuses on in-person

support groups, peer support can be provided through phone, e-mail, meetings, or parent support groups.

Delaney describes how parents help each other by: normalizing what is normal in adoption, setting realistic expectations, engendering hope, dispelling guilt, preparing for crises, and sharing innovative parenting strategies.<sup>3</sup> In a review of post-legal Adoption Opportunities grants, Howard and Smith noted, “Support groups were identified as the single most effective intervention or support in projects where consumer response was gathered.”<sup>3</sup> Rushton, in an analysis of support groups, explains why the peer support group process is so beneficial. “[Parent groups] may be used to enhance understanding of the children’s problems and the parents’ reactions and lead to joint problem-solving through discussion and sharing of experience.”<sup>4</sup>

In a survey of post-adoption services funded through Adoption Opportunities grants, the Child Welfare Information Gateway states that parents who received peer support through groups reported that they were less isolated, more empowered, more knowledgeable about adoption, and more confident in their ability to parent their children successfully.<sup>5</sup>

One parent noted after joining a support group “...through this whole adoption I have felt isolated for 7 years. Now I don’t—everyone can relate and help me...I can also help someone else in a crisis.”<sup>6</sup>

In an evaluation of a parent support network in Minnesota, 91 percent of parents said parent groups helped them be more prepared to parent their children and to find resources for their child or family. One parent noted, “We have become a very close group....It is good to know other families raising children with the same needs. It is good to have a place where you can go to talk about these issues and where you know others have been through the same things and will understand.” Two-thirds of respondents said that one-on-one peer support resulted in improvements in their family.<sup>7</sup>

Not only are parent-to-parent networks effective in helping parents raise their children, they are cost efficient because they can prevent disruption. In one survey of parent group members in a number of groups around the U.S., half of parents surveyed said the

group helped them avoid a disruption. A parent who was part of a parent-to-parent network explains: “For the first time I have come close to considering disruption. I am fighting to keep this adoption viable, and that is due to the support [my parent-to-parent network] provides. Otherwise it would be too tough.”<sup>8</sup>

Disrupted adoptions, kinship, and foster placements are costly and harmful to children. An economic analysis found that each adoption from foster care saves between \$90,000 and \$235,000 in public funds, when compared to keeping a child in long-term foster care.<sup>9</sup> If an adoption disrupts, obviously many of those funds are no longer saved. Keeping children in their families also saves the time and costs of searching for, recruiting, and training another family to care for a child.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Parent-to-parent networks help children and families. This manual is intended to help parents and family advocates learn how to set up parent-to-parent networks in their own communities based on model programs from around the U.S. and how to do a careful assessment of their community’s needs.

In the next section, we provide information on six peer support network models, with the most detailed information on Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation, a parent support network operated by NACAC. In the final section, we explain the process of developing a parent-to-parent network, with lessons learned from NACAC’s years of running the MN ASAP support network.

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- 2 Richard J. Delaney, *Safe Passage: A Summary of the “Parent 2 Parent” Mentoring Program*, 2000.
- 3 Jeanne A. Howard and Susan Livingston Smith, *Strengthening Adoptive Families: A Synthesis of Post-Legal Adoption Opportunities Grants*, 1997.
- 4 Alan Rushton, “Annotation: Post-Placement Services for Foster and Adoptive Parents: Support, Counseling or Therapy?” *Journal of Child Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1989.
- 5 Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Post Legal Adoption Services for Children with Special Needs and Their Families: Challenges and Lessons Learned,” June 2005 ([www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)).
- 6 Anne Atkinson and Patricia Gonet, “Strengthening Adoption Practice, Listening to Adoptive Families,” *Child Welfare*, March/April 2007.
- 7 Wilder Research Center, “Views of the Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation project: Results of interviews with parents about their experiences with project activities,” March 2006.
- 8 Parent served by MN ASAP, 2004.
- 9 M.E. Hansen, (2006). *The value of adoption*. Washington, DC: American University. Retrieved from [http://www.american.edu/cas/econ/working\\_papers/1506.pdf](http://www.american.edu/cas/econ/working_papers/1506.pdf) (May 19, 2008).



# SUCCESSFUL PARENT-TO-PARENT PROGRAMS

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Across the U.S. an increasing number of communities are operating successful parent-to-parent support programs. This manual will highlight Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation's parent support network and five other similar programs: Georgia Center for Resources and Support; Adopt Cuyahoga's Kids in Ohio; Iowa Foster and Adoption Parents Association; Adoption Support for Kentucky; and Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association. These programs help foster, adoptive, and kinship families better understand their children's special needs and keep their families healthy.

## MINNESOTA ADOPTION SUPPORT AND PRESERVATION (MN ASAP)

In the late 1990s more and more children—older children, siblings, and teens—were being adopted from foster care in Minnesota. This was a positive step toward securing permanent families for many children who used to age out of foster care. After adoption, however, many families felt isolated as they tried, on their own, to deal with serious issues, such as severe or violent behaviors, multiple mental health diagnoses, or significant developmental delays and learning problems in school.

In response to the need to provide comprehensive family support, Minnesota DHS awarded a collaborative contract to the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) and the Minnesota Adoption Resource Network (MARN) to establish and manage a post-adoption support program called Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation (MN ASAP). Over the years, the annual budget has been between \$600,000 and \$724,000.

MN ASAP's goal is to provide post-adoption support and services to increase the likelihood that

adoptive families will thrive. To do this, staff designed support services that:

- strengthen family attachments, family integration, and identity formation
- decrease isolation among adoptive parents
- increase knowledge of and access to support services

MN ASAP provides the following services:

### **Adoption Information**

The MN ASAP adoption information clearinghouse:

- responds by phone and e-mail to answer questions and identify resources for adoptive and foster parents, adoption professionals, prospective adoptive families, and others interested in adoption
- collects, compiles, and shares fact sheets and other resources on adoption-related topics
- maintains a comprehensive adoption-related web site
- publishes a quarterly post-adoption services newsletter
- maintains directories of agencies, professional services, training, etc

### **Training for Parents and Professionals**

The training program:

- identifies and publicizes training opportunities for adoptive parents and child welfare professionals across the state
- hosts trainings for parents and professionals on issues common to adoption such as attachment, abuse and neglect, grief and loss, and others
- collaborates with other organizations in the state to host and promote training opportunities

### **Parent Support Network**

The parent support network:

- includes a group of regional parent liaisons across

Minnesota who provide support and information to foster and adoptive parents

- identifies therapeutic, respite, and other resources in each region
- creates and enhances parent support groups
- pairs families with others for support through a buddy and mentor program

Below we will describe in detail MN ASAP's parent support network.

### Parent Liaisons

As a part of MN ASAP's parent support network, 11 parent liaisons work part-time (about 12 to 20 hours a week) from home serving different regions or populations in Minnesota. One liaison works statewide in the Native American community, and one works in the metropolitan area serving the African American community. The liaisons are each equipped with a computer, a phone and fax line, and each maintains a database of the families they serve. They provide peer support to adoptive, foster, and kinship families in Minnesota, empower parents to advocate for themselves, and make referrals to appropriate resources. Each liaison identifies local resources for families in their area, including doctors, therapists, and mental health professionals who understand the needs of adopted children. The liaisons also help connect families who can provide respite to each other.

In addition, liaisons build relationships with social workers from local public and private agencies so that they can refer families and improve their own support to families. Liaisons also serve as advisors on boards, committees, and nonprofits that serve children with special needs and the adoption and foster care community.

All experienced adoptive parents, the liaisons understand the needs of the families they serve. They know the importance of responding quickly to questions and concerns from parents and know how to handle crises and how to offer support when services are limited. They work with parents by phone, through e-mail, one-to-one in person, and in support groups to help them solve problems or access services.

### Support Groups

The parent liaisons also help to facilitate, support, and provide information to more than 42 support groups around the state. These groups typically meet every month, and may include training and special events in addition to offering time for parents to share challenges and successes and seek help with problems.

A parent group coordinator helps parents start new parent groups when there is a need in the community. She also provides training and resources to existing groups to help them offer services and meet the needs of parents in their area. (For more information on how to start and run a parent support group, visit the parent group section of [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org) to find an online version of *Starting and Nurturing Adoptive Parent Groups: A Guide for Leaders*.)

### Buddy Program

The buddy program pairs families with similar needs so they can provide peer support to each other, for example, pairing families who are raising children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) or families raising transracially adopted children or large sibling groups. Again, pairing like families helps normalize the adoption experience and enables families to help each other. MN ASAP staff asks each family to fill out a detailed questionnaire to aid in the matching process. Once matched, parents support one another by phone, e-mail, or in person.

### Mentor Program

MN ASAP also pairs new adoptive families with more experienced adoptive families who can serve as mentors. Mentors can help newer families understand their children's needs, navigate the system, work with schools, work with difficult behaviors, and more. MN ASAP collaborates with other organizations and local social workers to find mentors for families. Again, each family completes a questionnaire, and mentors go through training to prepare them for their role. The liaisons help facilitate the pairing of the families.

## Adoption Celebration

Each year, MN ASAP hosts an adoption celebration called Circus of the Heart, which serves about 800 parents and children. Circus of the Heart is a collaborative effort between MN ASAP and local public private agencies. Adoptive families are invited to a day of carnival games, prizes, refreshments, family photos, and an animal petting zoo. Many of the children who come to the event have learning problems in school; social, emotional, and behavioral issues; or other special needs, but this fun and safe event helps them relax and enjoy themselves.

## MN ASAP's Impact on Families

Evaluation of the parent support network showed the following the results for families:

- 84 percent of parents noticed improvements in their knowledge about youth behaviors and mental health issues
- 76 percent felt that they can better handle their adopted or special needs children's problems
- 75 percent felt less isolated
- 72 percent felt they had more appropriate expecta-

tions of their adopted children and their special needs

- 90 percent who had contact with their parent liaison reported improving their knowledge about their child's behaviors and mental health issues
- 72 percent reported improvements in their ability to feel good about their own parenting

When asked to describe changes they noticed in their parenting, parents stated they:

- felt more confident about their parenting
- take the issues and problems that come up less personally
- feel more sane and stable
- are more aware of cultural issues in their families
- are better advocates
- are more knowledgeable about the resources that are available to them

Parents found that MN ASAP provided them with emotional support, information, expertise about child behaviors and mental health issues, and help navigating the adoption system. Parents commented about their improved coping abilities:

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# MN ASAP Key Findings

Each liaison serves a different population in the state and each population has its own culture. In addition to targeted services that reflect the specific needs of communities of color, liaisons adapt services to the culture of their area. For example, liaisons in some rural areas often needed to advertise support group meetings as social events to attract families to attend. Many rural families view support groups as being for people with problems. Rather, they would be more likely to attend a social gathering, and in a private moment, ask their liaison or fellow group member for help or advice.

MN ASAP liaisons began by serving parents who adopted from the foster care system, but over time found that:

- Families would benefit even more if they had received services before placement. As a result, MN ASAP began serving prospective and pre-adoptive parents.

- Families who adopted internationally and kinship caregivers were often not receiving adequate supports so MN ASAP began to support these families.
- Families face enormous challenges—such as serious mental health issues, violence, or sexual abuse—but can survive these crises when they receive emotional support and have ongoing contact with a support system as well as receive needed services for their family.
- Families who experience a disruption also need support and if they receive adequate support, some of them are able to adopt another child.
- Services should be targeted to the whole family, not just the parents. Liaisons began promoting activities for youth that are led by youth and programming for adoptees and their siblings.

“... I am more knowledgeable in areas of dealing with adoptive and special needs kids, so I am less frustrated and more able to deal with the various systems.”

“There have been changes in my kids, especially one of them, in terms of attachment and identity. I am more confident as a parent because of the resources. I am more aware of the help that is out there. “

“I feel I am better able to cope. I don’t feel isolated and I am more aware and better able to access services ... “

## ★ *MN ASAP Parent Support Network*

www.mnasap.org

651-644-3036

<b>Provides</b>	one-to-one peer support, information, referrals and advocacy to adoptive, kinship, and foster families, support groups, adoption celebration, and training conference
<b>Serves</b>	the state of Minnesota
<b>Annual Budget</b>	overall program between \$600,000 and \$724,000; \$385,000 for the support network
<b>Funding</b>	federal Title IV-B, subpart 2 funds from the state
<b>Staffing</b>	11 parent liaisons (9 serving different regions in the state, 1 serving the African American community, and 1 serving the Native American community), 1 parent group coordinator, 1 project manager, and 1 part-time project assistant
<b>Strengths</b>	strong, compassionate, knowledgeable liaisons who are skilled at helping parents in crisis, validating their concerns and needs, and assisting them in finding solutions to their problems
<b>Challenges</b>	not enough services and adoption-competent therapists available, especially in greater Minnesota; limited funding prevents program from reaching and serving as many parents as it could
<b>Future Plans</b>	The program is up for re-funding from the state. Current staff would like to increase the number of hours for staff and add more staff, do more outreach to families and mental health and special needs service providers, and offer training retreats to families.

# MODEL PARENT-TO-PARENT PROGRAMS

The following model parent-to-parent programs from across the U.S. are similar to MN ASAP's parent support network. They show a wide range in program budgets and some differences in services. Most are statewide programs and one is countywide.

## ★ *Georgia Center for Resources and Support*

www.gacrs.org  
1-866-272-7368

The Georgia Center for Resources and Support is a statewide project funded by the Georgia Department of Human Resources and Department of Family and Children Services. The Center is run by Families First and Bethany Christian Services. In operation since April 2002, its purpose is to locate resources and support services for adoptive and foster families in order to reduce the incidence of disruption in Georgia.

Regional resource advisors offer initial support to adoptive and foster families and then quickly refer families to appropriate resources and professionals who can provide ongoing support. The advisors first find local resources

in their community—books, training, therapists, barbers, dentists, etc.—that can meet the needs of foster and adoptive families, and refer the families to these resources. Each advisor facilitates at least five regional trainings for families per year. They develop support groups by getting the groups going, helping them write their by-laws and mission statements, and then back off and let the groups run themselves. They can also step in to help rejuvenate groups that are floundering. Lastly, they take calls from parents and provide support such as advocating for families in schools or with the child welfare system.

<b>Provides</b>	resources, training, and support to foster and adoptive parents
<b>Serves</b>	families in all 17 regions in the state of Georgia
<b>Annual Budget</b>	\$775,000 initially; current budget is \$605,929
<b>Funding</b>	federal Title IV-B, subpart 2 funds
<b>Staffing</b>	originally 2 full-time project coordinators, 1 full-time administrative assistant, and 13 resource advisors servicing each region (2 advisors covered the metro area of Atlanta); now there are only 9 resource advisors who cover all 17 regions of the state (1 for metro Atlanta)
<b>Strengths</b>	all resource advisors understand the needs of families (almost all are adoptive/foster parents); an informative web site that is so helpful to parents they call less frequently; excellent lending library; great trainings
<b>Challenges</b>	having enough money to provide more services, unmet need to have some resource advisors & secretary work full time, long distance communication between statewide staff
<b>Recent Additions</b>	completed podcasts with local/national experts, videos of local/national experts that can be checked out from the lending library
<b>Future Plans</b>	creating more podcasts and making training available online, hosting web-in days—training featuring a series of speakers that are available to the public via internet and teleconferencing access

# ★ *Adopt Cuyahoga's Kids*

www.adoptionnetwork.org

216-325-1000

In 2002, the Adoption Network Cleveland (ANC) was asked by community leaders to develop strategies to find safe, nurturing, and permanent families for youth most at risk of aging out of foster care in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. At that time 1,700 children were legally free for adoption, including 780 youth for whom no permanent family had been identified. Most of these waiting children were children of color over the age of nine, for whom the public system had little hope of finding a family. Also, prospective adoptive families were sometimes feeling unsupported and confused during the adoption process.

In 2004, ANC and its partners launched the Adopt Cuyahoga's Kids Initiative and implemented the Adoption Navigator Program, a new service of offering support and information to people before, during, and after adoption. Those hired as adoption navigators have personal experience with foster care and adoption, know how the system works, understand the process for families, and help families advocate for themselves. Many navigators are former

foster parents, adoptive parents, social workers, or others who have been touched by adoption. They share a common goal of providing information, support, and encouragement to prospective and adoptive families as they move through all stages of adoption.

Adopt Cuyahoga's Kids employs a mix of program elements to both find permanency resources for currently waiting youth, and to recruit a flow of prospective adoptive families. The programs have been successful in placing youth, raising community awareness, and creating lasting systemic change. It has proven to be a dynamic and sustainable public-private-philanthropic partnership.

Key program elements include:

- child centered recruitment
- child preparation
- mentoring
- post-adoption support
- increasing public/private collaborations

<b>Provides</b>	recruitment, retention, and post-placement support and information services to foster and adoptive families
<b>Serves</b>	mainly Cuyahoga County and adjacent counties in Ohio
<b>Annual Budget</b>	about \$250,000 per year
<b>Funding</b>	Cuyahoga County Commissioners, area Community Vision Council, the United Way, the State of Ohio Faith and Community Based Initiative, George Gund Foundation, St. Luke's Foundation, Cleveland Foundation, and more
<b>Staffing</b>	six part-time adoption navigators totaling 3 FTEs and a supervisor
<b>Strengths</b>	having staff who have personal and/or professional experience in adoption has been critical to their role with families
<b>Challenges</b>	finding people with the right qualifications for meeting the needs of the job; would like to have all the adoption navigators be adoptive parents
<b>Recent Additions</b>	increased focus on post-adoption services to support the growing numbers of adoptive families; designed and implemented a training program for area mental health professionals and increased the number of therapists specializing in adoption from 4 to 20
<b>Future Plans</b>	exploring ways to expand program to other communities; continue to be proactive to meet the foster care and adoption community's needs

# ★ *Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association*

www.ifapa.org

800-277-814

Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA) began their liaison program in 1994, under a contract from the Department of Human Services using state dollars matched by federal Title IV-E dollars to fund peer support to help recruit and retain foster parents. Back then they only supported and trained adoptive parents who contacted them because, at that time, they didn't have access to the confidential names of adopted parents. In 2002, IFAPA received adoption incentive funds and expanded their outreach and services to more broadly include adoptive families. Each peer liaison is responsible for a geographic area of the state. They contact and refer families to resources in their area and provide policy, procedures, and confidential support through e-mail, phone, and person-to-person support, and offer training to families.

There are 18 independent contract peer liaison positions, five of them held by couples. Each position is contracted to work from home for 15 to 20 hours per week.

The liaisons are invited to attend an annual retreat where they receive training and support to do their jobs. They also have monthly telephone conference calls to provide updates and support for each other. They work hard to help families understand that IFAPA is a safe place to get help and that all foster and adoptive families will at one time or another need help.

Three new roles for liaisons this past year are:

- helping to build cultural connections for children who are placed in transracial adoptive and foster families
- providing peer support, information, and referrals to community services to kinship families.
- providing more guidance and support to foster parents working with birth parents

<b>Provides</b>	advocacy, peer support, training; support groups; information and referral; resources to foster and adoptive families; manages Iowa's adoption respite services; hosts an annual statewide conference for foster and adoptive families
<b>Serves</b>	8 regional areas that include all 99 counties in the state
<b>Annual Budget</b>	\$1,000,000 per year
<b>Funding</b>	Department of Human Services, plus some funding from United Way and Greater Des Moines Foundation
<b>Staffing</b>	7 office staff, 17 peer liaisons, 1 cultural liaison for the African American community in Des Moines, 38 trainers under contract with IFAPA
<b>Strengths</b>	statewide program supported by legislators and DHS, excellent peer support and training, outstanding publications, excellent collaborators with other key organizations in the state
<b>Challenges</b>	maintaining funding to provide the same quality services, shifting focus to match DHS's changing priorities
<b>Recent Additions</b>	now learning to serve birth and kinship families, looking for better ways to help maintain sibling connections and support teens who are aging out
<b>Future Plans</b>	maintain current programs and services

# ★ Adoption Support for Kentucky

[www.uky.edu/SocialWork/trc/ask.htm](http://www.uky.edu/SocialWork/trc/ask.htm)

877-440-6376

Adoption Support for Kentucky (ASK) is a consortium of parent-led adoptive parent support groups throughout the state. Families formed through adoption—including adoption from the state, private, relatives, and international, and those interested in adoption or fostering to adopt—can use ASK’s services. Modeled after MN ASAP, ASK began in December 2001 with an operating budget of \$100,000. By May 2002 16 adoptive parent liaisons were hired to serve 16 regions in the state at 20 hours per month.

Today each liaison works 50 hours per month and provide two support group meetings and two trainings per month. Together they offer 10,000 hours of e-mail, phone, and in-person support per year. This year 3,112 adoptive, foster, and kinship families attended support groups; 2,080 children were served with free child care during support group meetings, and 2,953 parents were

individually served. Liaisons also informally help to match families for mentoring and respite.

After six years in operation, the University of Kentucky conducted a survey of the program and found that:

- 68% of the parents stated that participating in ASK helped stabilize their families
- 38% of the parents said ASK prevented a disruption

Kentucky’s state administrator and adoption branch manager are extremely supportive of ASK. Each year the adoption branch manager attends part of an annual retreat to ask the liaisons what he can do to better care for Kentucky’s children. He also serves on the ASK Advisory Team which meets quarterly to ensure quality services for Kentucky’s adoptive families

<b>Provides</b>	support groups that meet in each of the regions twice a month, training, one-to-one support
<b>Serves</b>	adoptive (domestic, private, and international), foster, and kinship families
<b>Annual Budget</b>	\$325,000 per year
<b>Funding</b>	Title IV-B, subpart 2 funds
<b>Staffing</b>	director, program coordinator, and 16 regional adoptive parent liaison positions
<b>Strengths</b>	committed, hard-working liaisons, strong support from the director, supportive state administrators
<b>Challenges</b>	locations that allow childcare, finding qualified childcare providers, recruitment of parents to attend groups before crises develop
<b>Recent Additions</b>	received an additional \$40,000 to fund an adoptive parent conference in 2008 attended by 175 parents
<b>Future Plans</b>	offer the same quality service and attract more parents to the next ASK conference in 2009

# ★ *Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association*

www.mfcaa.org

816-350-0215

Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association (MFCAA) began in 1998 as a small support group serving 20 families and has grown into a thriving nonprofit that employs nine staff and serves more than 400 families per year. The state's premier trainer for foster and adoptive parents, MFCAA also advocates for foster and adoptive children and their families with the state agency, the legislature, and the courts.

MFCAA offers advocacy support and assistance to foster and adoptive families in school issues, behavioral interventions, obtaining support services, advocacy with Children's Division, CASA, or GAL team members.

They also provide crisis intervention services and help families find services to maintain child placements.

MFCAA currently serves as the parent organization for five support groups throughout Missouri, including the state's largest foster and adoptive parent support group serving 50 to 100 people monthly. In the Kansas City area, MFCAA hosts various specialty support groups for parents caring for kids with higher-level mental health and behavioral needs, and for parents who are new to fostering or adopting.

In 2008, MFCAA began a volunteer liaison program. MFCAA identified 19 skilled, experienced foster/adoptive families and asked them to serve as a resource to new families. Approximately 20 new families have been matched with experienced liaisons. The paired families go to MFCAA-sponsored educational and fun events to encourage strong, genuine relationships.

<b>Provides</b>	one-on-one support and referrals to families; provide food, clothing, school supplies, holiday and birthday assistance etc.; facilitate, support, and provide information to support groups throughout the state; provide systemic advocacy in legislation and policy; offer an annual foster care/adoption conference
<b>Serves</b>	foster, adoptive, and kinship families in all counties in Missouri and the Kansas City metro area counties in Kansas
<b>Annual Budget</b>	approximately \$500,000
<b>Funding</b>	state funding via subcontracts for services, foundation and private donor support, fundraising activities
<b>Staffing</b>	7 full-time and 2 part-time staff; all staff are trained in personal advocacy for foster/adoptive families, with 3 who specialize in advocacy outreach; 19 experienced foster/adoptive parent mentor volunteers serve as liaisons to other foster/adoptive parents
<b>Strengths</b>	strong support and advocacy for Missouri's abused and neglected children and the families caring for them, committed to assuring that all children have the opportunity to grow up successful, healthy, and happy, despite childhood histories of abuse or neglect
<b>Challenges</b>	families' limited access to mental health treatment, limited funding for comprehensive programs, struggling economy puts kids' programs at risk for funding cuts
<b>Recent Additions</b>	parent group coordinator has recently developed a kit and manual to help new support groups get started
<b>Future Plans</b>	would like to advocate for additional state/federal funding for expanded support programs for foster/adoptive families, state budget line item for retention activities for foster families, improved funding for guardian ad litem services for children



# HOW TO START AND RUN A PARENT-TO-PARENT SUPPORT NETWORK

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To start a parent-to-parent support program in your community, you must:

- find others who share your vision and work with them to make your dream a reality
- define your community and identify its needs
- seek funding
- hire a project manager and build community support
- hire and train qualified liaisons

The information below will help you walk through the steps of creating a program in your area.

## PARTNERING WITH OTHERS

First, you need to decide what partners might help you start a parent-to-parent support program. Whom would you like to work with? Who shares your vision? What are the organizations and who are the administrators that can work cooperatively with you to serve families? You know the culture and politics of your community. Trust your instincts.

Invite key people—support group leaders, social workers, and private/public agency administrators—to meet and discuss your ideas. Include a diverse group of adoptive, foster, and kinship parents from your community. Listen to what each person has to say about the growing partnership and program ideas. Identify others who might share leadership with you as you move forward with planning.

After the meeting, contact other people who may be of help. Form a core group who can continue to discuss starting a parent-to-parent support program. Hold additional meetings to define and assess your community and develop the program.

## DEFINING YOUR COMMUNITY AND ITS NEEDS

Determine the geographic boundaries that your program will serve. Then think about whom you will

serve. Will you serve public, private, and international adoptive families? Will you include foster and kinship families? Will you need to accommodate non-English-speaking parents? Will you serve families before and after adoption?

Will you begin with a countywide effort, a regional program, or a statewide initiative? Although funding may determine how far you can go, in this planning stage, consider what is needed and what your partnership can accomplish.

The next step is to determine the needs of the community you want to serve. Are there currently extremely limited services? Are there one-to-one support services available but limited numbers of mental health professionals and special needs service providers who are culturally competent and understand the deeper issues of foster care and adoption? Are there are good services for families living in the major cities but limited services for other residents?

Outline what families need and what they are currently able to access. Look for areas of unmet needs and map out how your prospective program could meet those needs. Use the expertise of your core group to help you define the community needs and decide what you can realistically provide. If you don't think it is possible to meet all the needs of the adoptive, foster, and kinship families, prioritize for now and look for ways to build on services over time.

## IDENTIFYING FUNDING SOURCES

As you look for funders, expect that they will want to know more about your group's mission and goals. You will also need to have nonprofit status or be affiliated with a nonprofit organization. If you want more information on how to become a nonprofit organization visit the parent group section of

www.nacac.org and find the fact sheet on becoming a nonprofit organization or contact NACAC.

To get the attention of potential funders, you will need to know the current research showing the importance of post-adoption support to build your case for funding. Keep in mind that many outsiders have little understanding of the needs of foster, adoptive, and kinship families and the children they love and care for and you will need to communicate the importance of that need. Avoiding disruptions and dissolutions helps children and saves taxpayers money.

A good fundraising strategy should include diverse sources of possible income, such as:

- foundation/corporate support
- contracts for services
- state funding
- creative use of post-adoption funds

### **Foundation, Corporate, and Government Support**

You may apply for grants from foundations, corporations, or local, state/provincial, or federal agencies. Some corporations like Target offer small grants to programs in their communities. Sam's Club and other organizations offer matching grants to programs that raise enough money to equal the grant.

When you research potential funders, note each funder's geographical area, funding restrictions, and program priority areas.

- Identify past grants by reading grant guidelines, annual reports, or tax forms such as IRS Form 990-PF.
- Look for information that tells you what types of groups are eligible for funding, how and when to apply, and how funding decisions are made.
- Identify the type of programs the organization funds. Some grant makers fund only specific program areas.
- Check your local library or the Internet for a guide to writing grant proposals and for an index of grant makers. Develop a list of organizations that support projects like yours. One good resource is the Foundation Center, which offers library collections with materials that list private foundations and corporate giving programs. Contact the Foundation Center at:

www.fdncenter.org or 800-424-9836 for more information.

- Many state and county agencies (departments of human services, health, mental health, juvenile justice, etc.) offer grants to nonprofits for particular programs. To find grant opportunities, contact the agencies and ask to be put on a list to receive requests for proposals that the agency issues. You can also search agency web sites (searching for grant or RFP) to find grant opportunities and to find ways to receive information about future grants. In Texas, for example, the Department of State Health Services has a page dedicated to grant-finding resources where you can sign up for funding alerts from the agency.

In addition, you might be able to partner with your state agency to offer services as part of the state's Title IV-B or IV-E plans or adoption incentive funds. To explore this option, set up a meeting with the state adoption manager to discuss the state's plan and how you might be able to be a part of future efforts. (To find your adoption manager, visit [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov), click on the link for National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, then search your state for State Foster Care and Adoption Officials.)

- Federal funds are sometimes available for specific projects. Newsletters and web sites of national adoption organizations might provide information regarding this kind of opportunity. You can register on the following site get information about available federal grants: [http://www.grants.gov/applicants/find\\_grant\\_opportunities.jsp](http://www.grants.gov/applicants/find_grant_opportunities.jsp)
- Your local United Way may also be a source of funds. Check its policy on potential funding.

As soon as your organization secures funding to start a parent-to-parent program, a team should be assigned to seek money to keep the project going into the future. Too many groups relax when they have start-up funding and wait until funding is gone or almost gone before they do any further fundraising.

### **PROJECT MANAGER ROLE**

The role of project manager is a critically important one. This individual must be able to build relationships in the community, supervise staff doing challenging work from their homes around the

community, seek funding, evaluate outcomes, and much more. MN ASAP's project manager is an adoptive parent and adoption advocate who understands adoptive, foster, and kinship families and what it takes to parent children with special needs. She also has strong connections to the adoption and child welfare communities.

It is vitally important for the project manager to personally check in with the liaisons often to see how each one is doing, to help them maintain good personal and work boundaries, to help problem-solve tough situations with clients, and to keep them feeling connected to each other and the collective work they share.

## HIRING LIAISONS

The key to providing quality peer support in your community is to hire and train excellent parent liaisons. MN ASAP and most of the other model programs hire experienced adoptive and/or foster parents. When hiring, you should ensure that liaisons are experienced and

are able to devote the time to this work, that you can trust their judgment, and that they will follow through and call the project manager for help, questions, or support.

It is incredibly important that the liaisons have a good working relationship with agencies in their areas, so the MN ASAP project manager asks adoption professionals to recommend parents they believe will be good candidates. The social workers then refer prospective liaisons. This method builds trust with the workers and helps ensure that the candidates work well with agencies. The program manager also hears about good parent liaison candidates who are members of the parent support groups and consults social workers about them.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF LIAISONS

Liaisons need to know the support services available in their community and have a deep understanding of families' needs. Most of the MN ASAP liaisons

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# *Proposal Outline*

Many grant makers offer specific detailed grant proposal guidelines. If you are given guidelines, follow them exactly. If you aren't, consider using the following outline:

- Introduction—Very briefly explain your organization's mission, the basic nature of the parent-to-parent support program, and the outcomes you hope to accomplish and how they relate to the grant maker's focus.
- Need/Statement of Problem—Explain the need for parent support networks, the lack of available programs, research and statistics on parent networks, personal stories, and other details that present a compelling picture of why your program is necessary.
- Purpose/Objectives—Include a description of the organization's goals, and how it relates to the impact of the project. Include specific, measurable activities and outcomes (15 families will be matched with a parent liaison, 20 children will participate in mentoring relationships, 5 families will be more stable, 2 families will avoid disruption, etc.).

- Approach/Work Plan—Identify the services to be offered—how, when, and to whom—and why these services will achieve the outcomes described above.
- Evaluation—Include activities such as surveys, interviews, or focus groups that can help you make ongoing changes in the program while you operate it, and other activities to determine the results of your work.
- Qualification/Organization Experience—Describe your group and its ability to offer this program, and identify any staff.
- Budget—Include a detailed line-item budget, a budget narrative, information about other current and potential sources of funding, and how you will continue the program into the future.

Writing a long proposal does not make it better. Try to keep your proposal simple, easy to read, and as short as possible. If possible, have it reviewed by someone who does not know the program to ensure that it is clear and compelling.

# Funding Sources in Canada

It has always been a difficult task to secure national adoption funds in Canada. Fortunately however, there are tools and resources available to help Canadian-based adoption organizations find needed funds, regardless of the current economic climate.

## GOVERNMENT SEARCH

Government support is a good place to start. Community-based agencies may want to approach municipal governments for funds; provincial agencies may want to approach provincial governments; and national agencies may want to approach the federal government. Nevertheless, one should not be restricted; agencies can seek funds from *all* levels of government.

## FOUNDATION & CORPORATION SEARCH

There are many foundations and companies across Canada who give to not-for-profit charitable organizations. As an organization seeking funds, it is important to research the foundation/corporation in detail prior to submitting a grant proposal. Many foundations/corporations have very specific funding criteria. You need to read this information carefully and follow the outlined application process.

## NARROWING YOUR SEARCH

### Stewardship Canada's Funders Directory

[www.stewardshipcanada.ca/funders/index.asp?type=static&page=funderhome.asp](http://www.stewardshipcanada.ca/funders/index.asp?type=static&page=funderhome.asp) allows you to search based on keywords and by application deadline dates. The great thing about this site is that there are no subscription fees.

**FoundationSearch** [www.foundationsearch.com/](http://www.foundationsearch.com/) is a great tool to consider when embarking on a funding journey. This organization allows funding seekers to refine their foundation/company searches based on various levels of criteria. For instance, as an adoption organization, you can search for foundations/corporations that have funded adoption-related causes in the past. You can also narrow this search based on year funded, location, amount, etc.

The downfall to FoundationSearch is its subscription fee.

**BIGonline** [www.bigdatabase.ca/](http://www.bigdatabase.ca/) is another interesting tool to consider. This tool is similar to FoundationSearch and also offers grant-writing tips and strategies. Again, this tool has a subscription fee.

have parented children with a variety of special needs such as attachment disorder, attention deficit disorder (ADD), fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), sensory integration problems, and learning issues. Most understand issues with local public and private schools as well as home schooling.

Parent liaisons need to be:

- experienced foster/adoptive parents
- knowledgeable about the child welfare system, adoption, and special needs
- knowledgeable about local or regional resources, including doctors, dentists, and therapists, etc.
- able to develop positive relationships with staff from their local counties and private agencies and to work within the system
- able to separate their own issues from those of the families they will serve
- empathic
- strong advocates for families

- resilient
- excellent communicators
- able to laugh
- passionate about and committed to helping families

Liaisons will need to be able to respond to a variety of family needs by providing:

- general adoption information
- information on topics like adoption assistance, parenting children with challenging behaviors, or specific special needs
- case advocacy help in schools, courts, or other systems
- referrals to local services such as therapists, medical professionals, tutors, and respite providers, etc.
- emotional support and professional referrals for families in stress or crisis, including families:
  - who want to disrupt an adoptive placement or dissolve an adoption
  - whose children are verbally threatening or

# Sample Budget

Below is an annual budget for a parent-to-parent support program that employs a full-time program manager, a project assistant, and nine liaisons. It also includes office space and a website. It is possible to have a lower budget by running a smaller program with fewer liaisons, part-time staff, and no website.

## Costs per liaison

\$15,600	wages (\$15/hr x 20 hrs/week x 52 weeks)
\$1,560	benefits (10% of wages)
\$700	computer (1 time)
\$500	travel
\$1200	phone & Internet (\$100/month x 12 months)
\$500	training
\$20,060	total cost per liaison

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\$180,540 total costs for 9 liaisons serving 9 regions

## Management and office expenses

\$40,000	program manager salary
\$10,000	program manager benefits (25% of salary)
\$15,000	administrative support
\$10,000	website and brochure (1 time)
\$6,000	office space (\$500 per month)
\$1,200	phone and Internet (\$100 per month)
\$400	web hosting (per year)

## \$263,140 Total Program Costs

physically violent toward parents or other children

- whose children are sexually harming other children in the family
- who are facing allegations of abuse and neglect

Liaisons will need to be able to quickly establish trust with parents by:

- listening carefully and accurately reflecting back what the parent is saying
- demonstrating knowledge of one or more resources that will help a family and referring them to other experts and resources
- helping to normalize the adoption experience by conveying an accurate understanding of adoption

- issues and how they relate to the family's problems
- following up with additional suggestions or referrals if the family needs more help

## Interviewing Candidates

When interviewing potential parent liaisons open-ended questions will help you learn how the candidate communicates with others and solves problems. Sample questions include:

- What are three important things you have learned as a foster and/or adoptive parent?
- What do you view as the primary areas of concern for foster/adoptive parents in your region?
- What might distinguish you from other foster/adoptive parents that would make you a good parent liaison?
- Give an example of a situation within your foster care or adoption experience that was stressful. How did you handle it?
- Describe a job situation where you had multiple tasks. How did you manage the tasks successfully?
- Describe the kinds of calls you could handle on your own, when to call the project manager, and when to call 911.
- What experience do you have:
  - supporting or helping other families in your area
  - locating resources for families in your area
  - participating in support groups
  - working with diverse groups of people
  - doing community organizing
  - using resources, and what is your knowledge of available resources for families
  - using computers
- Please tell us about any training you have attended on adoption and special needs issues.
- Describe your relationship with county social workers or agencies within your region.
- We support all types of adoptive families, including single parent, transracial, large families, and gay and lesbian families. Are you comfortable supporting non-traditional families?
- How do you see yourself scheduling your time to be a parent liaison?
- How will you handle work coming into your home? How will you set boundaries for yourself and find support?

## Training Liaisons

Once you have hired liaisons, you will need to train them about your program, special needs, adoption, and more. Below are some topics to cover in an initial training:

- foster care and adoption—how the system works
- the process from foster care to termination of parental rights to adoption
- adoption placements
- transitions for children and families
- seven core issues of adoption
- common special needs in adoption, including attachment, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and attention deficit disorder
- transracial families
- family dynamics, including splitting parents and sibling dynamics
- school issues
- sexual abuse
- developmental stages in adoption, including adolescent development

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## *Dealing with Crises*

Liaisons are not meant to be crisis managers. They are supposed to offer support, information, and referrals. They are not qualified to provide crisis services to parents and should refer families to trained professionals. If there is no trained professional in the liaison's geographical area that can deal with the crisis, the liaison should see if a nearby professional can offer help.

The project manager should set up a protocol for handling crises, including providing a list of places to refer families to and guidelines for when to call 911. It is important for liaisons to receive guidance on how to be a good listener and yet remain detached enough to not get sucked into the panic response parents have about their situation. Some families may feel they are in crisis, but after hearing more the liaison's assessment might be that the family is experiencing normal bonding and attachment issues related to a new adoption. More information on attachment and added support may be all the parent needs to help soothe his alarmed response.

- trauma and recovery
- characteristics of successful adoptive parents
- the warning signs of disruption
- self care
- staying healthy and knowing when to ask for help
- managing reports and evaluation
- supporting parents
- facilitating support groups
- establishing boundaries and maintaining ethics

When you plan training make sure to allow time for networking. The liaisons need time to bond with each other and develop a team identity. They are isolated as they work from home and team training provides time to laugh, share information, and support each other.

After the initial training, liaisons need ongoing education. MN ASAP liaisons meet quarterly for two days of training, mutual support, and therapeutic self-care. Sometimes a therapist joins the meeting to lead a discussion on therapeutic self-care and other times the group facilitates its own discussion. In addition, liaisons attend training in their communities on adoption issues, special needs, and more.

Adoption Support for Kentucky's strategy to help retain liaisons is to hold an annual retreat for the liaisons and their spouses. The director recognizes that spousal support helps each liaison succeed, and the retreat helps couples strengthen their commitment to the work and build their resilience. The couples attend training to learn new information and receive support for the emotional strain of working with families in crisis.

### SUPPORTING LIAISONS

The project manager has a responsibility to provide ongoing support to liaisons, which can be challenging when they have difficult jobs and work often far away. Key ways that MN ASAP supports its liaisons include:

- getting to know the liaisons very well
- fostering a staff environment of respect and commitment to the work
- communicating regularly by phone and e-mail and meeting as often as you can
- encouraging liaisons to connect with and support each other
- encouraging liaisons as individuals and members

## *Establishing Trust and Providing Support*

Providing support can be difficult especially with clients who have complex issues. The following tips will help liaisons work effectively with parents:

- **Share something relevant about yourself** — If it relates to a parent's concerns, liaisons could briefly share personal information to show their own experience in this area. It is important for the liaison to only share enough pertinent personal information to establish trust and not let the focus shift from the parent's needs.
- **Stay calm and assess the parents' situation** — When a parent is in crisis, liaisons can also feel overwhelmed or be reminded of trauma in their own life. Liaisons should remain calm, listen to the client, and slowly repeat back what the parent has shared. While liaisons reiterate what has been said, they should make a mental assessment of the parent's needs and think of clarifying questions to ask and the kinds of resources that might help the family.
- **Listen, validate parents' concerns, and offer support** — When they ask for help, some parents wonder:
  - will others understand my problem?
  - will they blame me for the problem?
  - are there positive, immediate solutions?

Liaisons need to keep these unspoken worries in mind as they listen and assess the client's problem. A liaison needs to empathize with the parent and say things like: "I hear you saying..." or "It sounds like you are feeling..." which will help validate the parent's concerns. This helps build trust and creates an environment that allows the parent and liaison to discuss possible solutions.

- **Encourage parents** — Parents need a safe place to say things like "I didn't know it was going to be so hard." or "I don't know how to help my child." or "I don't know if I can do this anymore." Liaisons need to remind parents they are competent parents who are dealing with complicated challenges. They

can ask parents which parenting techniques have worked in the past, and ask them to recall a recent positive experience with their child. When they are reminded of their own strengths, parents can often move forward and build on those strengths.

- **Remind parents that providing a family for a child is a wonderful thing to do, that all children have gifts and strengths, and that joining a family can be hard for a child who has been traumatized** — Liaisons should talk about the child's past and present pain and how the child might be feeling. They can explain how special needs can affect normal development and discuss appropriate expectations and how to build on positive experiences.
- **Respect where the parents are on their adoption journey** — Liaisons need to know that each person's adoption journey and understanding of their adoption issues is different. Meeting parents where they are and helping them move forward is sometimes what a liaison needs to do.
- **Find a way to use humor** — When the timing is right, it can be helpful to interject humor into a stressful conversation. The most natural way would be for the liaison to tell a funny personal story that relates to the situation. Humor is a powerful tool to reduce tension and to show the parent that he may later be able to look back on this time and laugh.
- **Remember parenting is a lifelong experience** — The healing process after an adoption may be slow. Liaisons should encourage parents to think about the long term, and to join a support group to connect with other families who can help them now and in the future.
- **Help parents take better care of themselves** — Liaisons should remind parents that having fun, feeling joy, and laughing can rejuvenate them and make them better able to handle difficult times. Liaisons can help parents think about what brings them joy and what they like to do for fun.

## *Establishing Boundaries and Maintaining Ethics*

While operating your parent-to-parent program, you will want to establish and maintain trusting relationships with families, partnering organizations, workers, and agency administrators. All conversations with parents and professionals must remain confidential.

During training, you must discuss how liaisons will work with families in an open, honest, trustworthy manner even when parents feel they have been misled, misinformed, or unheard by their worker or agency. A family may feel they were not given full information about their child, and you will need to help the family without taking sides. Sometimes information is not known at the time of placement or adoption. Some parents were informed of the mental health issues or early abuse their child experienced but didn't understand how these issues would play out in their family.

It can be challenging for liaisons to not become advocates, taking parents' side. Your training can help them maintain neutrality while helping parents become advocates for themselves. It is critically important for the program to ensure that liaisons know what their role is and what the limits should be.

Prepare liaisons that they may counsel parents who need help because they have made mistakes with their children and need gentle correction. Some parents may be in denial about what their real problems are, and some may seem unwilling to be flexible in a situation that demands flexibility. You will want to work closely with the liaisons to make sure they understand how best to work with families in as many situations as possible. Liaisons provide support to families but they are also mandated reporters if they suspect neglect or abuse. Define in advance with your liaisons how you to handle their role in these delicate situations.

of the team

- reminding liaisons to take care of themselves
- providing comprehensive initial training and ongoing training
- holding quarterly in-person meetings
- encouraging liaisons to develop areas of expertise and generously share information with each other
- remembering that liaisons have tremendous compassion and respect for parents and children, which can make them vulnerable
- providing mental health support. The work is difficult and parents' problems may trigger memories and feelings for liaisons. MN ASAP staff occasionally meet with a licensed therapist to help them process difficult issues and to build their resiliency.

Parent support can be extremely stressful, so liaisons need good self-care skills. If they work from home, liaisons may need help establishing boundaries. The following tips can improve liaisons' self-care:

- set limits and boundaries on when and how they will take calls, such as using caller ID and voice mail during off hours, and not giving out cell phone numbers or addresses

- find a way to process difficult calls by journaling or speaking with a coworker or supervisor (while maintaining confidentiality)
- remember that, even if there is no solution to a family's problem, liaisons have helped by listening

## *Cutting Costs for Training*

In statewide or larger programs, building strong staff relationships can be expensive due to travel, food, and lodging. As budgets are always tight, some parent-to-parent programs found creative ways to build their teams.

Georgia Center for Resources and Support increased its use of technology to train and support their staff and the families they serve. When the program began, the advisors met once a month, which soon become too expensive. Staff now meet online using Yahoo Instant Messenger. They can chat, see each other, and even display online PowerPoint presentations for staff and clients.

- to, understanding, and validating parents' concerns
- remember that being an adoptive parent and working with other adoptive parents who are experiencing problems can be challenging; recognize the kinds of calls that trigger their own problems
  - take a break from the work when they need to
  - maintain relationships with friends who have nothing to do with adoption or child welfare
  - stay resilient by doing the things they like to do, pampering and indulging themselves
  - find ways to celebrate who they are and the work they do

and analyze data that can be useful in providing direction for the future. Evaluation helps an organization stay fresh and focused on their goals.

## CONCLUSION

Starting and running a parent-to-parent support program is a vital service to your community. It is a cost-effective way to serve families and helps make a difference in the lives of children. Follow your passion, collaborate with others, and work toward the completion of your goals. Others have done it and you can, too!

## EVALUATING YOUR PROGRAM

Evaluating the effectiveness of your parent-to-parent program is important—both to ensure that you are achieving your goals and to have outcomes to show to current and future funders. For its evaluation, MN ASAP contracted with an external consultant to design and conduct a survey of parents served by the program. The process began with staff identifying the specific program goals (reduce isolation, improve family functions, prevent out-of-home placements, etc.), and then determining questions to mark progress toward those goals. We then randomly selected interview subjects who had been served by the program.

The phone survey included the following questions (among others):

- Why did you contact MN ASAP?
- How satisfied were you with MN ASAP's services?
- What changes, if any, did your family experience as a result of your participation with MN ASAP?
- Since becoming involved with MN ASAP, has your ability in the following areas improved:
  - Have appropriate expectations of your child?
  - Understand your child's special needs?
  - Know about behaviors and mental health issues in youth?
  - Feel that your family is stable?
  - Have access to services, including respite?

Although the MN ASAP evaluation was done by an evaluation expert, such external evaluation is not necessary. You can use phone surveys, on-line surveys (such as [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com)), focus groups, or print surveys to assess the results of your work. Evaluation helps your organization see what you have accomplished, learn what you need to work on,

