

Schirato family shares lessons learned with new caregivers

Bill and Bonnie Schirato became licensed foster parents because they wanted children to love, but had none by birth. Years before, Bill had a job as a crisis worker with Allendale Association. Through his work he saw the damage done from multiple placements and the separation of siblings when in foster care. Bill decided then that some day he would like to foster sibling groups and provide a positive experience for them.

His decision was backed with action. The Schiratos have been licensed for 10 years, initially with Catholic Charities in Lake County and now with Arden Shore. He and Bonnie have been a family for 11 children so far; seven years ago they adopted three siblings. The group at home now is lined up with teens at ages 14, 15 and 16, plus one more child in foster care.

Along with Bill and Bonnie's commitment to fostering, Bill is certified to teach prospective foster parents through PRIDE Training. He enjoys sharing his and Bonnie's experiences. He hopes that by teaching and inspiring foster parents from the beginning, he can help them get started on a firm foundation.

"I hated seeing negative press on foster parents. I wanted to create a positive face of foster care," said Bill.

If Bonnie could change one thing about the child welfare system she said it would be, "To increase communication between all the parties involved in the foster children's lives. Everyone is so busy it is hard to really know how the case is progressing. I would also like to see an increase in the collaboration between birth parents and foster parents."

The Schiratos have worked with several birth parents to transition the children back into their homes. Bill and Bonnie feel that it is essential for foster caregivers and parents to learn to trust each other's intent and to know they have the shared goal to return the children home to their parents.

At the same time, the Schiratos have learned to create a sense of permanency for the children who won't be returning home. The Schiratos have enjoyed watching their children blossom through adoption and grow proud of who they are. They celebrate their children's adoption date every year by allowing them to pick their favorite restaurant. Bonnie also enjoys picking out a



special gift to give to each child at their dinner.

Walking both sides of permanency can be complicated. If the Schiratos could give advice to a new foster parent it would be to "Expect the unexpected. Don't expect to know the answer for everything. Get help when you need it. Trust your instincts; and be patient."

Implementation plans translate to action steps to serve caregivers

Recently, the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council announced the results from scoring the 2010 Foster Parent Law Implementation Plans. The following responses to how foster care programs meet the Law's Rights and Responsibilities illustrate what the plans can mean for caregivers.

The DCFS Northern Region plan included details on how it addresses the "Right to be given standardized pre-service training and appropriate ongoing training." DCFS licensing staff will consult with foster parents twice a year to develop a training plan that will enhance their skills and address the needs for the type of child usually accepted by that home. The DCFS training coordinators will also help implement a caregiver training plan.

At Our Children's Homestead, the agency described how it meets the "Right to be informed about how to contact the child placement agency in order to receive information and assistance to access supportive services." In addition to

the staff phone numbers, this agency provides caregivers with a 24-hour on-call support system, since caregivers and children often require support beyond workday hours. They can anticipate the on-call worker will answer or return their phone call within 15 minutes.

Caregivers have the "Right to be given information regarding the child under full disclosure requirements from the Children and Family Services Act." In response, Evangelical Child & Family Agency developed its own tracking form to document that caregivers received all required information. ECFA also has a form specific to adoption and guardianship cases, so workers and families can ensure the information is accurate and available.

Caregivers at all foster care programs can review the Foster Parent Law Implementation Plans. Contact your agency, or the DCFS Office of Caregiver and Parent Support at 217-524-2422 for details.

Parents as Teachers prepares youth age 0 to 5 in U-46 school district

Given that the foundation for education is best laid early, parents then are the best first teachers their children can have. However, that role can be intimidating without preparation, knowledge and support. The Parents As Teachers program fills in the gap for families in the School District U-46, which covers Bartlett, Carol Stream, Elgin, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Schaumburg, South Elgin, Streamwood, Wayne and West Chicago.

Once parents enroll in the program, a certified parent educator will visit with the parent and child in their home to support them in the role of primary educator for their child. Parents are taught child development activities that will encourage language and intellectual growth, large and small muscle practice, and social/emotional skills.

For activities outside the home, Parents as Teachers organizes weekly playgroups so children can make friends and learn about social interaction. There are also workshops where parents can learn different aspects of child rearing, with free babysitting.

Parents as Teachers provides many specialty services, such as developmental screenings for children zero to three. Once a month, teen parents join the Baby and Me of Young Parents support group. Spanish-speaking parents can also participate in a weekly support group.

All of these programs are offered from September through May. They are free for families living within the U-46 school district. For more information on these programs please call 847-888-5000 ext. 7190 or visit the Web

site at: www.u-46.org/earlylearners/PAT.cfm.

To find other educational programs for families living across Northern region call a DCFS Local Area Network (LAN) Liaison

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DCFS Education Advisors are ready to help with school concerns

Caregivers can count on a team of three professionals to help with education issues for youth attending school systems in the Northern Region. Through a partnership with Northern Illinois University, the DCFS/NIU education advisors advocate for youth in care and also work with adoptive and guardianship families.



Rhonda Best



Aundrea Nabors



Robena Morgan

Education Advisor Rhonda Best and Assistant Advisor Aundrea Nabors work from the Rockford office. Education Advisor Robena Morgan works from the Joliet office. The advisors each come with a wealth of knowledge and experience in education. With the background of working in or with schools before joining DCFS, they know how to navigate the system. They understand school issues including special education, attendance policies, discipline and a host of other concerns.

The Education Advisors can assist with the assessments and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for special education. When there are behavioral issues, they can work out an intervention with the school. They can answer caregivers' questions and attend school meetings with them. They will help caregivers and caseworkers obtain appropriate educational services for the children. They also will help caregivers plan for education after high school.

Working with an Education Advisor can be very positive and gratifying. They identify with and highly value caregivers and the children in their homes. They recognize and empathize with the frustrations and needs of both the education and child welfare systems, making them invaluable advocates. They advocate effectively because they know what children have the right to expect from schools. The advisors are each well-versed in the federal and state education laws and DCFS Rule 314 concerning education services that must be provided to children in DCFS care.

Since every school can have a slightly different way of doing things, it helps to have an Education Advisor sitting beside the caregiver as you both advocate for the student.

Northern Region Education Advisors

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DCFS Northern Region Education Advisors are available to meet with parent groups to provide information and training on educational issues.

Some of the topics available are:

- Gearing up for Back to School
- Being on the Same Page (Home/School Collaboration)
- Sharpening Your Advocacy Skills
- How to Get Help for Your Student who Doesn't have an IEP
- Transition to Life after High School
- Bullying

If there is another educational topic of interest, contact an Educational Advisor so they can customize a presentation for you.

To schedule a training or for more information, contact Rhonda Best at 815-967-3750 rhonda.best@illinois.gov or Robena Morgan at 815-730-4342 robena.morgan@illinois.gov



Northern Region Caregiver Training

Foster PRIDE In-Service Modules

All caregivers are welcome to attend PRIDE In-Service Training. The descriptions below will allow you to decide which classes fit your family's needs or circumstances. Advance registration is required for all classes. In addition to the slate of classroom courses, caregivers can also take advantage of Digital Pride modules on CD and the full offering of Lending Library materials.

For the most up-to-date and complete schedule information for classes offered in your area, visit the on-line Virtual Training Center anytime at www.DCFStraining.org or call the DCFS Office of Training at 877-800-3393 during regular business hours.

Module 1 - Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children at Risk (12 training hours)

This module focuses on building self-esteem in children. It covers how kids act when they need recognition, power, freedom, enjoyment, and a feeling of belonging. Caregivers will learn how to listen to what kids say and not what we think they say.

Module 2 - Using Discipline to Protect, Nurture and Meet Developmental Needs (9 training hours)

This workshop provides practical information to foster parents about how to use effective discipline techniques such as I-messages, natural and logical consequences, time out and how to catch kids being "good" and what to do to encourage positive behavior.

Module 3 & 4 - The Sexual Development of Children and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse (9 training hours)

Participants learn to differentiate normal from problematic sexual behaviors in children and youth, signs and symptoms of sexual abuse and ways to help sexually abused children recover.

Module 5 - Supporting Relationships between Children and Their Families (9 training hours)

This training focuses on helping foster parents learn how to help kids attach to caregivers and at the same time stay loyal to birth families. Caregivers learn about how to prepare and support children for and after visits with the birth family and how to share the parenting role with birth parents.

Module 6 - Working as a Professional Team Member (9 training hours)

Foster parents learn team members' roles, when and how to be an advocate for children, what conflict is and their own personal style for managing it, and how conflict can be a "win - win" situation for everyone involved.

Module 7 - Promoting Children's Personal and Cultural Identity (6 training hours)

Culture includes traditions, values, customs and history. What "culture" means to a child's self-esteem, how to manage cultural diversity in a foster home, how to discuss sensitive issues with children and how to help a child record his or her history are topics covered in this module.

Module 8 - Promoting Permanency Outcomes (9 training hours)

The focus of this training is on families who have children in care and supporting reunification of the children and parents.

Module 9 - Managing the Impact of Placement on Your Family (6 training hours)

In this training, caregivers learn how fostering children can affect family relationships and how to minimize stresses that can result. They also learn about the supports that are available.

Module 10 - Understanding the Effects of Chemical Dependency on Children and Families (15 training hours)

Foster parents study the risk factors for chemical use, abuse, and dependency and understand relapse and recovery and be able to acquire skills necessary to be an active member of the team to support recovery in birth parents.

Module 12 - Understanding and Promoting Preteen and Teen Development (6 training hours)

This new course assists caregivers to identify developmentally appropriate ways to best promote healthy development for preteens and teens who have experienced abuse, neglect and trauma. This six-hour module will help foster/adopt caregivers understand teen brain development and the impact of trauma and loss on preteens and teens.

Participants will learn specific strategies that caregivers can use when fostering teenagers in the day to day life of the foster family.

The Teen in Foster Care: Supporting Attachment (6 training hours)

Attachment and the Teen in Family Foster Care will help foster/adopt caregivers to understand how early attachment experiences have impacted the teen's development. The training covers the teen's perspective on how the accumulation of loss, separation and trauma impacts his or her beliefs, feelings, behaviors and relationships. Participants will learn specific tips for helping manage behaviors that develop over time from the teen's adaptive responses to trauma, grief and loss.

Educational Advocacy 6 training hrs.

It is mandatory for one foster parent in each family to attend Educational Advocacy Training in order to be re-licensed. Educational Advocacy Training is offered following each Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE training and many additional times. This six-hour course covers information foster parents need to know so that they can advocate for their foster children's educational rights and needs.

Northern News

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Anyone can call the regional reporter with foster parent association news and schedules; local training notices; features on foster families and community members working for children; photos; and ideas for news articles or supportive services that would be helpful for caregivers to know.