

## RESEARCH AND POLICY SOLUTIONS

### WINNING APPROACHES TO STRENGTHENING FAMILY-BASED CARE

When a child must enter foster care, living with a loving, stable family is the most effective way to help them heal and thrive. Children of all ages do best when they live with someone they know and trust, like family members or friends, which is also known as “kinship” foster care. When kinship foster care is not possible, children and youth should be with foster families who have the necessary skills and support to nurture their health and well-being.

Research makes it clear that supporting children and youth in family-based care leads to better outcomes compared to group foster care.<sup>1</sup> Family-based settings are also more equitable and cost effective. Consider what we know.

#### BENEFITS OF FAMILY BASED FOSTER CARE OVER GROUP FOSTER CARE

STABLE FAMILY-BASED FOSTER CARE	GROUP FOSTER CARE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Minimizes child stress and trauma<sup>i</sup></li> <li>✓ Decreases emotional and behavioral disorders in children<sup>ii</sup></li> <li>✓ Increases academic achievement<sup>iii</sup></li> <li>✓ Maximizes continuity of therapeutic services<sup>iv</sup></li> <li>✓ Decreases overall program costs<sup>v</sup></li> <li>✓ Nurtures healthy relationships with adults and siblings<sup>vi</sup></li> <li>✓ Leads to more positive outcomes into adulthood<sup>vii</sup></li> <li>✓ Better prepares kids to live in a family<sup>viii</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Places youth at increased risk for physical and sexual abuse compared with children placed with families<sup>ix</sup></li> <li>✗ Deprives children and youth of critical parenting figures<sup>x</sup></li> <li>✗ Increases likelihood of behavior problems<sup>xi</sup></li> <li>✗ Is often used even when there is no clinical reason for it<sup>xii</sup></li> <li>✗ Is disproportionately used as a placement for Black and LGBTQ+ youth in foster care<sup>xiii</sup></li> <li>✗ Is associated with an increased involvement in the juvenile justice system<sup>xiv</sup></li> <li>✗ Is 6 to 10 times more costly per month than foster care<sup>xv</sup></li> <li>✗ Is 2 to 3 times more costly than treatment foster care<sup>xvi</sup></li> </ul>

#### Birth and Foster Family Relationships

Approximately half of all children in foster care return home, making it important that kin and non-kin foster families partner with birth families. By providing coaching, mentoring and co-parenting, the child-parent bond is nurtured, and successful reunification is supported. For children and youth who cannot return home, the role of the foster family changes to support an alternative permanency option — either with relative guardians or through adoption.

“I tell parents ... that I am their parent partner. That I am helping them through their time of need and that my ultimate goal is to get their children back to them.”

— Foster parent, Louisiana

<sup>1</sup> *Group foster care* refers to non-therapeutic living arrangements in a large or small institutional or group home setting. It may also be referred to as *institutional*, *residential* or *congregate* care. Children and youth in foster care may need time-limited, quality therapeutic residential treatment to address an acute need.

## FAMILY-BASED CARE

### SOLUTIONS OVERLOOKED FOR TOO LONG

Strengthening kinship and foster families improves outcomes for children and lowers costs. Yet policies to support family-based care have been overlooked as solutions. Instead, many states continue to invest scarce resources in costly and less-effective group care. Prevailing myths stand in the way of investing in families.

Consider the facts.

- **FACT #1: There are enough families willing to foster.** Research shows that more than one-third of adults have considered or would consider becoming foster parents.<sup>xvii</sup> Agencies can best harness this interest by utilizing a “customer service” approach and being responsive to caregivers throughout the fostering experience, starting at the point of initial inquiry and continuing throughout the application, licensing, and training processes.<sup>xviii</sup>
- **FACT #2: We know what it takes to retain foster families.** More than half of non-kin foster parents quit within one year.<sup>xix</sup> Foster parents report that they need crisis management support, better training, and professional respect.<sup>xx</sup> Effective training and support for foster parents is associated with improved retention, increased placement stability, and improved parental capacity to care for children and youth.<sup>xxi xxii</sup>
- **FACT #3: Children and youth want to live with families.** Children report overwhelmingly positive experiences with the foster families who care for them. More than 90 percent “like who they are living with” and “feel like part of the family.” Rates of positive experiences are highest for children who live with kin and lowest for children who live in a group care setting.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- **FACT #4: Kinship families provide safe, stable, and loving homes for children.** Research shows that children in foster care with relatives compared to those with non-relatives have better mental health and behavioral outcomes, greater stability, higher levels of permanency, and are more likely to stay connected to brothers and sisters, their community, and cultural identity.<sup>xxiv xxv xxvi xxvii xxviii</sup>

#### Family First Prevention Services Act: The right direction, but not far enough

The Family First Prevention Services Act, passed in 2018, took a big step in the right direction by emphasizing that kids do best in families. The law supports parents, kinship caregivers, children, and youth by restricting federal payments for using group care. Where Family First falls short, however, is that it fails to provide targeted financial incentives to help child welfare agencies effectively recruit, train, and support foster and kinship families so that family-based care is a viable alternative to group care. We know what’s needed and urge policy makers to take additional steps to ensure that Family First’s vision can be fulfilled.

## POLICY SOLUTIONS EXIST

### WINNING APPROACHES TO STRENGTHENING FAMILY-BASED CARE

Federal, state, and local policymakers must re-evaluate and retool investments to better serve children and families. By investing in proven, effective strategies, children, youth, and families will experience better and more equitable outcomes.

#### WHERE TO START?

**KIN-FIRST POLICIES.** When an agency makes it a priority to place children and youth with someone they know, they minimize the trauma that children and youth experience, increase placement stability, and help reduce group care. Taking a kin-first approach also frees up non-kin foster families to care for children and youth who don't have viable family options.

▶ **START HERE:** Require family finding, engagement, and support caregivers from first contact throughout the life of the case; utilize emergency licensing and non-safety licensing waivers for kin; and fund dedicated kinship staff positions.

**EFFECTIVE FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT.** Every organization knows that success depends on having the right people doing the work. The same is true for foster care. We need a diversity of families who have the skills and disposition to care for kids who have experienced trauma. Recruiting enough families is achievable.

▶ **START HERE:** Ensure agency recruitment practices are data-driven and have measurable goals such as increased kinship placement and a foster parent pool that reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of children in care; involve youth and foster, kin, birth, and adoptive families in recruitment and training activities; and adopt licensing standards that remove barriers for kin and non-kin foster families.

**RELIABLE FAMILY SUPPORT.** When a kin or non-kin family says yes to caring for a child or youth, that is only the beginning of the journey! In order to be successful in their role, families need ongoing, targeted support that meets the unique needs of each child or youth in their care.

▶ **START HERE:** Establish and fund peer support groups and peer mentors for foster and kinship families; hire dedicated staff to support foster families; and provide accessible respite and 24-hour crisis and stabilization support.

*"When I'm able to connect with another foster parent with experience, I can learn from them so that I don't make the same mistake. I can use their experience to better support children in my care."*

— Foster parent, Maine

**ENGAGE FAMILIES AS VALUED PARTNERS.** Foster, kinship, adoptive, and birth families know better than anyone what is needed to support children's health, education, and social-emotional development. Their first-hand experience can help agencies improve policies and procedures so that children and youth thrive.

▶ **START HERE:** Create and financially support an inclusive and diverse parent advisory board that can guide policymaking and ensure that all families receive the support they need to care for children and youth.

## RESEARCH AND POLICY SOLUTIONS

# IMPROVING FAMILY-BASED FOSTER CARE AND OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

CHAMPS is a campaign to improve outcomes for children in foster care through policy improvements to family-based foster care. In support of this goal, CHAMPS brings together a broad-based coalition of partners to share research and policy solutions to assist policymakers nationally and in states in championing reforms.

See the CHAMPS playbook and other policy tools at: <https://fosteringchamps.org/policy/>

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