



WE ASKED:

Some young people in foster care have difficult behaviors as a result of their trauma. What support could be provided to a family to keep a child in-home, rather than placed in a facility?

The Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123) became law in 2018. This law can be seen as the most significant reform to the child welfare system in decades. Family First aligns the investment of federal dollars with what people with lived experience and the research have told us: **children do better in families.**

The Family First Act can allow states, jurisdictions and tribes to reimagine child welfare systems - including how we can make sure family placements are prioritized for young people, especially young people who are experiencing trauma-related behaviors. It allows for the use of existing federal resources for prevention and early intervention services to **keep children safe, strengthen families and reduce the need for foster care whenever it is safe to do so.**

Within this, it also establishes requirements for placement in residential treatment programs and improves quality and oversight of services. Given that we know children do better in families, it is essential for leaders to understand what strategies help support families and youth before the need for congregate care placement even arises. **The best way to do so is to hear directly from those with lived experience with the child welfare system.**

KEY THEME 1

Invest in our **mental health** and well-being by ensuring we have access to trauma informed therapy, mental health services including in-home services, and training for Foster Parents and Caregivers.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

I think that **family members as well as the child would benefit from learning about the effects of trauma in the brain**. There is a specific curriculum that focuses on how the brain changes from trauma and teaches how to develop healthy relationships in spite of such experiences. Having a context in which to understand ourselves and others as well as **learning real strategies for better relationships and healthier emotional responses may benefit entire families**.

-Melodye , Community Partner from Ohio



Individual and family therapy can go a long way. However, a foster youth may have trouble trusting a therapist, so allowing the youth to choose from a few therapists can really make a difference. **Therapy is a must in my opinion, as a therapist can aid communication between a youth and family**. Additionally, firm boundaries can be helpful. However, there's a balance. A parent needs to take into account the youth's perspective to be "fair".

-Emily, Foster Alumni from Minnesota



You can have heavier intervention between the family and the state. **Having caseworkers to help provide resources for mental health especially and addiction treatment**. A trend that happens in abusive and neglect homes is that sometimes they don't understand how to be informed or get help and just continue the cycle. **Providing families with mental health help, resources for where to go, financial literacy, anger management and addiction counseling can greatly affect the betterment of families**.

-Josephine DuVal, Foster Alumni from Kansas FosterClub All-Star



Experienced trauma therapist is a must. Consistent at least twice a week therapy needs to happen. There is also a need for trauma therapy for the caregiver as well. Ensuring a consistent scheduled environment is essential as well. Having caseworkers check up twice a month to see if any needs for the child or family have changed. **Providing trauma therapy coping mechanisms should also be discussed with educational settings to ensure the child is getting needs met consistently**.

-Jessica, Former Kinship Caregiver from Texas



As a kinship caregiver of now nine years, **we have benefited from age and subject appropriate counseling**. During the years different trauma related situations have become apparent and things like academics or death presented themselves and behaviors changed, **I felt it important for me first to understand and then help her to learn how to deal with it in a positive way**. A lot of times or actually most of the time I attended the sessions with her to learn how to apply appropriate techniques and understand how my granddaughter was seeing things.

-Kinship Caregiver from South Carolina



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Every child will need to express their emotions differently, so understanding their likes is key. Rather than becoming frustrated by their difficult behavior in your world..dive into the child's world. **Create a place for them to feel safe.** Use coloring, sports, games, and movies to help them communicate: in the child's world they can better express themselves because they understand it more. As time goes on, **that child can slowly but surely become comfortable enough to trust you with that trauma and decrease difficult behavior, creating a better space for everyone.**

-Brittany Veron, from Florida with Children's Home Network (Pinellas)



My mother had mental health issues and my father was an alcoholic. We were a poor family. **I think if services had been provided to my family for mental health, alcoholism and help with poverty, perhaps I wouldn't have had to go into care.** Childcare would also have been helpful while my mother was institutionalized for her mental health.

-Katherine, Foster Alumni from California



Usually if a child is having behavioral issues at home or in school and it's due to their past trauma, most likely there is going to be mental health services needed. Don't worry, 'mental diagnosis' is only our way of showing off our invisible battle scars. So as the mother or the child don't be embarrassed to get help, always care for yourself mentally and physically.

-Sarah Maples, Foster Alumni and Parent from Georgia



Specialized therapists do help somewhat but I would suggest **hands on therapy like outdoors activities** once in a while (i.e. more day camps).

-Susana, Foster Alumni from Oregon



For a young person behavioral health supports should be a part of regular health care options. It should be understood that 'problem behaviors' are strengths. They are coping mechanisms to deal with trauma. When a young person needs support with trauma it helps to talk to a counselor, coach, or mentor. When they need empathy parents can show unconditional love. When they feel lost or need correction, everyone can help them find a better way. **The parental caregivers, behavioral health, and educators can serve as a team to help guide the young person towards a healthier future, to make goals and plans, to step towards adulthood knowing they have a family and community that cares about them.** Even after a young person reaches adulthood it helps to know they have a family of support.

-Jeremiah Donier, Parent from Washington Interagency Fatherhood Council



I believe that counseling, care, and frequent check ups can help keep children in the home. I believe **oftentimes it is a lack of knowledge not necessarily a lack of love** that results in abuse.

-Jynnahlove, Foster Alumni from California



In Maine we now have **trained liaisons/mental health advocates and counselors who can work one on one with the caretakers to help them understand the underlying behaviors and learn ways to provide**

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appropriate ways to manage the behaviors. The liaison team does not work with the child but may observe the interactions between the caregiver and the child so a plan of intervention and supports can be created.

-Bette Hoxie, Kinship Caregiver from Maine with Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine Inc. and the Kinship Program



I was that foster youth who had the difficult behavior and none of my foster families knew how to handle me because of it. I believe foster parents should have trauma specific training so that they can understand what a youth might be feeling or experiencing and the foster parents can move forward with how to best help the youth but also working with that youth so they are part of the planning. I did not verbalize easily so my foster parents and my social workers used writing as a way for me to communicate. They saw it worked so we kept using it. With more training and finding what works for a youth, I believe things could be better for both foster parents and the youth.

-Justyce Callisto, Foster Alumni from Vermont with The Youth Development Program



I believe a trauma informed specialist or therapist is needed to help the youth understand what they went through and understand the deep cause of their behavior. It'd be helpful to have a separate discussion/session with the parent so the parent can understand what their child is experiencing. It could also open the door for the parent to realize their own trauma that they may be imposing on their child without even being aware of it.

-Zoe Jones-Walton, Foster Alumni from Texas with FosterClub



Provide support, such as therapy and family counseling. I was a foster youth who went into kinship. **Therapy and family counseling was mandatory and kept up for years after kinship placement. This helped me to overcome and talk about my trauma and issues. I am in a much better place because of my and my family's participation.**

-Foster Alumni from Wisconsin



Proper training for foster parents, **free respite/babysitting for foster parents** (for weekly date night, alone time), mental health services for foster families, **mental and behavioral health services** for children in care.

-Karissa Lemme, Parent from California with QPI



Attending therapy with their biological or foster family. Make sure the social worker is supporting the youth as much as possible as well as the supervisors ,lawyers and everyone else in the agency. Leaving a child ripped from their parents in a facility, it doesn't get more traumatizing than THAT. Then based on your gender you are removed from siblings in a facility. **Make sure to do everything to keep the family together in a home. Is very essential to help every child.**

-Joanna Garcia, Foster Alumni from New York with Peer Support



KEY THEME 2

We need **support groups** for youth, parents and kinship caregivers.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

The support of the community is needed to help the child understand the cause of their behavior and find a neutral means of transmitting it. Every time I was placed in a higher level of care, **I can pinpoint the lack of support I felt living under that constant threat of institutionalization. To truly provide an environment kids can thrive in, that threat needs to be removed completely. Facilities should never be an option for any child.** There were times I ran away to live on the street that I know could have been turning points had I not been punished for that behavior. It was an opportunity for emancipation that was repeatedly taken from me along with my freedom due to liability and fear coming from those who took that power from me and my family. I truly believe a lack of freedom and independence is at the root of many kids who act out. They lack the security of knowing what will happen to them when they age out. Earlier intervention is possible if we eliminate the fallback option institutions provide, even with whatever limits are imposed.

-Madelein, Foster Alumni from Montana



Definitely a **support group so the child can express themselves vocally without being judged versus a psychiatrist who will evaluate them.** I would also say a counselor, bible study, or a pastor, and also physical activity, meditation, or a local club that meets weekly. These are all free services most of the time and allows the child to express, heal, vent, and also have a community and support group to connect with.

-Sharae Washington, Foster Alumni from Indiana



I think that the most help that parents could benefit from would be **open classes that parents could attend to get help with drugs and alcohol etc.**

-Raquel Littleeagle, Foster Alumni from Montana with All Star Youth Services



Children usually act out in foster homes because of intense grief and loss from losing relationships with their parents and their entire biological families. **Ensuring children are able to safely connect with members of their biological families, fictive kin, and/or community members is a great way to help reduce or alleviate the longing, pain, and powerlessness youth feel from not being able to engage with their bio family when they want/need to.**

-Kimberly Mays, Parent and Kinship Caregiver, from Washington

Transparency is key. Make sure all information is given before placing and provide the necessary supports to help the child and family. **Different support groups could be beneficial to help support families and people with individuals that have a variety of diagnoses.**

-Paula Bibbs-Samuels, Kinship Caregiver with Texas Parent Collaboration Group and Texas Children's Commission



I also think there should be a cool place for **both the parents and youth to have a peer-mentor so they have someone that can relate and guide them in the appropriate direction!**

-Alise Morrissey, Parent with Washington's Parents for Parents Program



KEY THEME 2

We need **support groups** for youth, parents and kinship caregivers.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

Connect them with peer/community support, to **make sure they continue to have that support until they feel comfortable**. Find what techniques work for that child.

-Tiffany, Parent from Florida with Family Engagement Advisory Board



A lot of children could benefit from a mentor program, so that they can have a **positive non-clinical role model outside of their home and family environment**.

-Emily Hartman, Foster Alumni from Colorado



A support group for the family could be helpful as well so they know that there are others who are in similar situations.

-Zoe Jones-Walton, Foster Alumni from Texas with FosterClub



Equip families with adequate skills to handle behaviour issues resulting from a child's traumatic experiences through continuing education. **Set up a support system for families caring for children with trauma by having accessible resources during a crisis situation consisting of trauma experts, regular family check-ins, provision of respite support to avoid caregiver burnout.** Counselling support for children immediately after placement.

-Teresita, Kinship Caregiver from Canada



Parent partnering and mentoring programs are excellent ways of helping children that have challenging behaviors. Because it can be overwhelming for the caregiver, having a parent partner can give you periods of relief, as well as give the child an understanding partner outside of the home. It is like respite care and can become a lasting relationship. There are many respite programs as well as mentoring programs that can be used to match your family with the right partner. It is like taking a break so you can regroup and take control. Your partner parent could be a teacher, friend, church member, coworker, or public servant. Remember to ask for help. Just like you want to help someone wants to help you.

-Cassandra Gentry, Kinship caregiver from Washington DC with DC 127 and Generations United



KEY THEME 3

Communicate with us. Honest and transparent conversations help us feel safe while connecting us to resources that meet and support our everyday and basic needs.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

There are many things that should be provided to the family in order to keep a child in-home. For example, educating the family about mental health. **Offer a list of resources that the family can offer the youth, and resources to help the parent learn how to communicate with the child.** Have a community in which parents can share their concerns and strategies about dealing with challenging behavior—also, **training about how to communicate.**

-Jaquelyn, Foster Alumni from Oregon



I think **honesty and communication is the best answer** for this question. We have to understand why the child was placed in foster care and go from there. Meaning that if a child doesn't like to go to church find out why. With you forcing them might trigger some bad memories for them.

-April, Foster Alumni and Foster Parent from Florida



Better communication.

-Amber, Foster Alumni from Pennsylvania



I think it's really important for the family to be trauma informed and if they have to take a class or a training that gives them a chance to talk to somebody or interact with somebody that has lived trauma experience that way they **have a better idea of how that youth feels and what they're dealing with. You can't help them if you don't understand them,** also always remember to create a safe space for the youth and let them know that you're here for them and what they went through is never their fault.

-Laura, Foster Alumni from California



I believe **the main support would be communication, having realistic conversations with the child(ren).** Another way would be providing a support group for children in their communities and that may change often but at least children will have people around them that have like experiences.

-Eileen Graham, Parent from Georgia with GA PAC



What could be offered for **both the child and parent is a support group that can be reached at any time to help with communication and relationship building techniques.** Also group activities with other families going through the same thing so they know they're not alone.

-Christina Romero, Parent from Florida with Family Engagement Advisory Board



Oftentimes, children are removed from their homes as a result of neglect. This neglect may be the result of lack of food, poor living conditions, unemployment, insufficient clothing, lack of medical attention, or no available transportation. At the onset of a crisis, the best way to determine what supports a family needs is to ask them. **Every member of the family, including the children, needs to be asked "how can we help you?" "What are you in need of?"** It's easy to assume what you think a person in crisis needs. That assumption may prove untrue. **The best way to keep a family in crisis together is to first listen intently to what they say they need, then make suggestions and recommendations.**

-Marquetta King, Parent from Maryland with Arc Northern Chesapeake Region



KEY THEME 4

Invest in our **normalcy**, access to activities that promote positive youth development, family engagement and connections to community.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

Some different ways that I feel like families can be supported when it comes to keeping a youth inside the home is **learning how to deal with different types of background**. Like the prompt stated, youth come from different struggling trauma. This trauma could be most likely kinship related, so I think **classes or even programs about how to enact good family orientation is something needed**.

-Kaeyoni Phillips, Foster Alumni from Indiana Youth Advisory Board



"CASAs, creating a plan with the child and showing them ways on how to calm down. **Support for the parents, helping them work with the child on their level. Things for us to do that are good and healthy to help utilize our energy and time and get kids involved in healthy fun activities.** Meeting families where they are at."

-Harley Former Foster Alumni, from California



Another support could be providing the family with bonding activities like going camping, fishing or on **some adventure that would get them away from their usual environment and be able to create new memories to connect with**.

-Zoe Jones-Walton, Foster Alumni from Texas with FosterClub



Keeping children at home may require tapping into their strengths and what they like to do like piano lessons, basketball, reading, or dance.

-Eileen Graham, Parent from Georgia with GA PAC



Protective factors! **Filling the family with all the protective factors**. Parent Mentors **looking at families individually rather than cookie cutter services**.

-Jody Rodgers, Parent from California with BFPP, BPNN, and Child Parent Institute



First it's really evaluating oneself, what are our triggers? How do we handle stress? Where do we go for resources? **Understanding the protective Factors and ACEs**. Finding the triggers of the youth that are in care. Be consistent and disciplined and knowledge of discipline that it's most successful with the youth. **Respite will be important for both**.

-Bruce, Kinship Caregiver from South Carolina



I'd say **activities such as family events and activities provided by DHS or foster care to build stronger connections with the family**. I think that would've helped me when I was going through the system.

-Anthony Christon, Foster Alumni from Oklahoma



Providing activities around the community for kids and how to deal with that sort of thing and to know when to ask for help and who they could go to.

-Raquel Littleeagle, Foster Alumni from Montana with All Star Youth Services



KEY THEME 4

Invest in our **normalcy**, access to activities that promote positive youth development, family engagement and connections to community.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

Finding and providing positive outlets, hobbies, mindfulness apps, having access to an emergency phone to be able to reach out if ever needed. Having access to CASA workers, and other related programs that help foster youth.

-Forster Alumni from New York



I would say youth should be able to get resources to help them cope with issues at home. Also **try and encourage the youth to join a club or a sport to help them keep distracted.**

-Storlie, Foster Alumni from Minnesota



KEY THEME 5

Focus on intensifying **in-home services** and supports based on our families' specific needs, as opposed to rushing to remove us from our homes and families.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

In-home therapy for children and family should be the number one priority. Case management, helping families connect with various therapies and managing specialty appointments (i.e. art/music therapy, outpt therapy, psychiatry appointments).

-Emily Hartman, Foster Alumni from Colorado



One of the essential resources for the family would be **health insurance that covers treatment and counseling for the child**. Many times parents and foster parents do not know how to reach these resources, and many **parents face financial difficulties that can come along when having to pay for therapy or treatment**. I believe that all parents should be educated and informed about mental health issues so that the child can get the help and tools they need to succeed.

-Jaquelyn, Foster Alumni from Oregon



Kinship offers a great resource to families! The main objective is to **guide the family to the resources needed to financially support the home**. We also refer services to families for additional support needs, such as mentors, or tutoring to help the child academically at the school.

-Katherine Cabrera-Diaz, Kinship Caregiver from Florida



Food assistance, assistance with bills and utilities.

-Jayonna Yahsha, Foster Alumni from Michigan with River Jordan Women's House and FosterClub



I know from experience with my son that rather than him being placed in a facility he was better off at home. There are **kids in facilities that all experience different trauma and need different help**. It's just not offered or not out there for them, and so all children with trauma or differences so to speak are placed in the same spot. Children with greater trauma than my son's acted out more so than him, causing more trauma to my son. **If he were home getting the help he needed these events that occurred at the facility wouldn't have happened.**

-Tara, Parent from South Carolina



More intensive in-home supports, rather than rushing to remove a child from the home or placing them in DCF custody.

-Leslie, Community Partner from VT



In Washington, we have tried to advocate for **'family focused behavioral rehabilitation services' to be provided in-home to a family as opposed to placing a child in a facility where they would get these services**. I have seen this approach be very successful for a family. We also try to ensure in-home parenting supports, concrete services, and identifying an agency that **focuses on both the parents and child/youths needs** to get them connected to the appropriate supports.

-Alise Morrissey, Parent with Washington's Parents for Parents Program



Funding for families, **employment support, transportation, in-home intensive services.**

-Community Partner from Vermont

KEY THEME 5

Focus on intensifying **in-home services** and supports based on our families' specific needs, as opposed to rushing to remove us from our homes and families.

The following is a selection of Family Voices on this key theme:

Home-Based interventions that focus on family, not just behavior of the youth or the youth's trauma.

Family Centered Treatment addresses trauma within youth and family members. The goal is to provide tools for healing and for **self-determination of the family post treatment**. I don't know of any other model that focuses to this degree on family engagement (which also includes consideration of 'social determinants of health'.)

-Laura Boyd, Parent and Kinship Caregiver from North Carolina with NCTSN, Duke University, and Thompson Child and Family Services



Support that can be provided in-home, family therapy exercise for trauma activities, emotional support family meetings.

-DB, Foster Alumni from New York



First consider a whole person care model. Most problems in a home can stem from multiple factors so address these concerns first (Maslow's Hierarchy of Need). Afterwards, **social workers should provide culturally competent care to the family and ensure that the family is the leader in their case**. Consider language barriers and racial background of clients to provide support that will work best for them. **If therapy is required please make sure it is culturally competent as well and provide resources and services that will best suit each family**. What does the family want? What does the child want? How can they heal from their trauma and move forward? What is the best course of action? Removing the child from the home is the last resort.

-Regina, Foster Alumni from California



FAMILY VOICES UNITED

About the Family Voices United Campaign

The Family Voices United Campaign elevates the voices and perspectives of youth, parents, and kinship caregivers, collectively known as “family voices” or “constituent voices”. Individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system are currently sharing their stories and expertise to educate, inform and transform the systems that serve children, youth, and families - both in policy and practice. With new federal legislation - the Family First Prevention Services Act - states, tribes, and territories have new opportunities to implement changes that many constituents have identified are needed to fully support keeping children safe in strong, supported families.

Join the movement!

Sign up at FamilyVoicesUnited.org