

## Provide Timely Access to Trusted, Dedicated Staff and Peer Support

CHAMPS, which stands for Children Need Amazing Parents, is a policy campaign focused nationally and in states to promote high quality foster parenting. CHAMPS is based on the understanding that all children need and do best in families. Foster parents, including kinship caregivers, play a primary role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. In fact, stable, quality foster parenting is one of the most powerful ways we can help children in foster care to heal and thrive. It is associated with a range of better outcomes for children, such as greater success in school, healthy relationships with family, and improved health and safety.

The CHAMPS policy playbook highlights six priorities for policy change, including providing foster parents with dedicated staff and peer support.

### Why is it important to provide foster parents with dedicated staff and peer support?

Children and youth in foster care fare better when they have stable placements. High turnover of foster parents contributes to unstable placements; however, research has shown that support to foster parents is associated with improved foster parent retention and decreased placement failure, key factors that influence stability. Foster parents commonly report that the single most important factor to their ability to care for children – and their desire to continue fostering -- is having access to someone they trust to discuss the needs of children in their care. Policy should provide that every foster parent has dedicated staff and peers who can provide needed support and advice in a timely way.

#### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- An analysis of placement stability and disruption found the amount of emotional and social support a foster parent received had a significant impact on increasing foster placement stability.<sup>1</sup>
- Accessibility of staff was identified as an important element affecting a parent's intent to continue fostering. For example, foster parents need their calls returned and questions answered in a timely fashion, within 24 hours in times of crisis.<sup>2</sup>
- Foster and adoptive parents shared that child welfare staff with expertise, such as permanency specialists and resource workers, were helpful in navigating the process and providing support. Parents also noted the strength of parent support groups, particularly in helping to meet their emotional needs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Crum, Wes. (2010) Foster Parent Parenting Characteristics That Lead to Increased Placement Stability or Disruption. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 32, 185-190.

<sup>2</sup> Hudson, P., & Levasseur, K. (2002). Supporting foster parents: Caring voices. *Child Welfare: Journal of Policy, Practice, and Program*, 81(6), 853-877.

<sup>3</sup> Barnett, E.R., Jankowski, M.K., Butcher, R.L., Meister, C., Parton, R.R., & Drake, R.E. (2018). Foster and adoptive parent perspectives on needs and services: A mixed methods study. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 45(1), 74-89.

## STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Through policy and supportive practice, we can help provide timely access to trusted, dedicated staff and peer support. Strategies that work:

- **Provide dedicated peer support workers.** Some jurisdictions contract with licensed and experienced foster parents, on either a paid or volunteer basis, to mentor new caregivers, prevent problems from becoming crises and intervene when crises do occur.
- **Provide dedicated agency caseworkers.** Child welfare agencies can employ dedicated caseworkers who support foster families through all phases of the fostering process, including home studies, training, placement matching and ongoing support.
- **Ensure peer support groups are formed.** Policy can encourage the formation and maintenance of support groups and require frontline staff to inform current and prospective caregivers about local, statewide and national groups.
- **Provide telephone support.** Many jurisdictions have toll-free helplines available to assist foster parents with a wide range of concerns and to connect them to the right person.
- **Support kinship navigator programs.** Navigator programs can link kin with a wide variety of resources, including support groups, financial assistance, legal services, recreational opportunities, healthcare providers and more. These programs often work best when the navigators are peers.

## TAKING ACTION

CHAMPS calls on child welfare agency leaders, legislators and other decision makers to provide timely access to trusted dedicated staff and peer support. Suggestions for getting started:

- **Agency and program leaders** can survey foster and kinship caregivers about the current support they are receiving, what's working and where gaps remain. Leaders can work with foster parent groups to review the feedback and discuss ways to strengthen staff and peer supports.
- **Legislators** can hold a hearing or listening session to learn more about what foster parent supports are working and what gaps exist. Foster parents, agency leaders and caseworkers can be invited to share their experiences and discuss opportunities for improving supports to foster parents, and in turn, improving the care to children and stability of placements.
- **Advocates, families and community leaders** can raise up the importance of stable, caring homes for children and youth in foster care, and why it's critical for foster parents to receive needed support from the agency and the community. They can bring together foster and kinship families, youth, agency leaders to discuss what supports are needed in order to improve quality foster parenting and stability.

## CHAMPS RESOURCES

- **For more information on CHAMPS**, go to [www.fosteringchamps.org](http://www.fosteringchamps.org)
- **For administrative and legislative policy examples** related to providing staff and peer support to foster parents, check out the CHAMPS policy playbook at <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org>
- **Learn more about CHAMPS technical assistance options** at <http://fosteringchamps.org/champs-technical-assistance/>
- **Contact CHAMPS** at [info@fosteringchamps.org](mailto:info@fosteringchamps.org)