

Northwest Institute for  
Children and Families

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# **Foster Family Constellation Project**

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## Third Evaluation Report

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**Prepared for:**

Jim Theofelis, Founder & Executive Director  
The Mockingbird Society

**Prepared by:**

Northwest Institute for Children and Families  
School of Social Work  
University of Washington  
4101- 15<sup>th</sup> Ave. N.E.  
Seattle, WA 98105- 6299

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# Foster Family Constellation Project- Final Evaluation Report

## Executive Summary

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The Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP) has demonstrated an innovative improvement for delivery of services for children in the foster care system. The Project was implemented with the Mockingbird Society as the lead agency working cooperatively with UJIMA Community Services. The FFCP was designed to overcome several shortcomings of the current system including multiple and ill-planned disruptions in placements, separation of siblings, and the lack of support and training for foster parents caring for children with challenging behavioral and emotional disorders.

The FFCP implemented a hub home model that offers respite and support to a constellation of five families that are providing foster care or kinship care. The project succeeded in each identified goal: (1) parents reported feeling supported in their roles as foster parents and caregivers were very satisfied with the availability and quality of respite care, (2) siblings did remain together in placements, (3) services were culturally appropriate for the African American children and families, (4) parents of the children who received tutoring reported that the children showed improved attention in class and increased concentration that resulted in improved grades in the majority of classes, and (5) parents and youth reported feeling that they had a “new family” through sharing experiences with other project participants. Parents reported feeling less isolated and the origins of a micro-community were forming among the families providing kinship or foster care.

The initial constellation of five families with a hub home has received services for one year. Respite care was provided an average of seven hours a day. Respite was a strategy that strengthened kinship caregivers as well as non-kin foster parents. The immediate availability of respite prevented at least two disruptions in placements and this averted the already overwhelmed child welfare system from having to absorb these children and spend additional resources on placements. This suggests that the expansion of the model would maintain the stability of placements for other children and could keep children in familiar family situations and settings that are supportive of the children’s racial and cultural identities. The stable placements should also

lead to decreased stress and to increased feelings of loss that are associated with multiple placements.

The characteristics of the hub home parents contributed positively to the completion of planned project activities and to the project outcomes. For future expansion or replication, a recommendation is to select prospective hub home parents with skills in communication and organization as well as knowledge of the parent-child relationship who can be trained and prepared to interact with families and children. The success of the project was also partially attributed to the proximity of the families that favored their participation in the planned activities and it is recommended that this is considered for future expansion or replication.

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## The contribution of the Foster Family Constellation Project to the field of child welfare

The Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP) was based on the premises that the model for caring for children and youth in the foster care system could be improved to yield better outcomes. A recent report from the Pew Commission documented, from the perspective of former foster children and parents, that the system has not consistently succeeded in serving the children and families who need it most (Pew Commission, 2004). The Commission report indicated many children in the foster system have not experienced supportive family relationships but have sustained psychological, social, and emotional scars. Siblings placed in foster care have often been separated, endured multiple placements, and faced numerous disruptions in school attendance. As a result, foster youth have higher patterns of under-achievement in school, suffer from insecurity, and lack comfort in forming interpersonal relationships. The Washington state Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) that was based on data on the state's quality and quantity of care provided to children in the child welfare system, also documented that the Children's Administration was not consistent in ensuring placement stability for children in foster care. An additional finding was that delays occurred in accessing mental health services or in providing adequate mental health services to meet foster children's needs (U.S. DHHS, 2004).

As further evidence that improvements should be made in the state foster care system, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services settled a class action lawsuit in 2004, that was brought on behalf of children in foster care. The lawsuit identified that: children in state care often experienced disrupted placements, foster parents were not trained adequately, siblings were separated, and mental health services were not made available.

The need is apparent to improve the existing foster/kinship care service delivery model. Not only have negative consequences occurred for children who have been placed in foster care but the foster parents face challenging parenting situations in relative isolation. The foster parents have taken in children with social and emotional needs while not always receiving the training, support, encouragement, or respite that would sustain them in their caregiving efforts that would lead to optimal child and youth outcomes.

The unique element of the FFCP was the cluster of foster families with the hub home that was available for respite care, parent peer support and training, child-centered activities, and community building family centered social events. The Foster Family Constellation Project was based on the provision of planned respite care and crisis respite care at the hub home to sustain foster parents in their caregiving and to reduce the number of disrupted placements. The hub home was licensed and had available 2-3 beds for the constellation family children. In the FFCP model, the child would have the time and opportunity to develop a relationship with the hub home parents and would feel comfortable to go there if the child and the foster parent were not getting along. The children could go to the hub home for the social events and could also go for planned or emergency respite.

A key feature of the model was also that children, could be in respite care in the hub home and then be placed in a constellation home, or could go into respite care in the hub home after any challenging situations to the placement arose in the constellation home. The hub home could serve as a buffer to prevent an immediate disruption that might occur if an older child or adolescent did not get along with the constellation home foster parents.

The Foster Family Constellation Project was designed to create a micro-community to nurture African American children through increasing the stability and reducing disruptions in their placements in foster care and kinship care. The project focused on African American children as children of color are over-represented in the child welfare system. The King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality found that African American children are also more likely to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care, remain in long-term foster care, and wait longer to be adopted.

The goals of the project were to:

1. Support the foster family parents/ guardians' caregiving that will ultimately lead to positive youth outcomes that include reducing the number of placements for youth, improving regular school attendance, class behavior and academic performance.
2. Place siblings together or in close contact with each other.
3. Help the youth to feel culturally connected with their heritage and feel supported in developing and maintaining their cultural identity.
4. Offer mental health counseling for children and/or parents, tutoring services for children and youth, and additional social and recreational activities that will provide meaningful connections for children and youth to peers and adults.
5. Provide the children and youth with the benefits of an "extended family" through the hub home that is available as a resource to minimize the disruption of the child's placement.

The project was led by the Mockingbird Society Executive Director in Seattle, Washington who formed a partnership with UJIMA Community Services to recruit families for the project in the last quarter of 2003. The Project also included a concurrent service component for two children who were cared for in a foster home affiliated with the Children's Home Society of Washington (CHSW). The children received medication and behavior management services through the residential program on site at the CHSW. The care of these two children was not funded through the demonstration funds for the FFCP, so in the remainder of this report, the Project refers to the cooperative partnership between the Mockingbird Society (lead agency) and UJIMA Community Services.

The Foster Family Constellation Project has provided an array of services to six families. One family has been a hub home to offer respite care and peer support for the five families that are referred to as constellation families in this report. Each constellation family has two foster children who are siblings. Three of the constellation families are headed by a single parent. Two constellation families as well as the hub home are two-parent families. The hub home family and one constellation family each have a child who is not a foster child. The project services are highlighted below:

Family focused activities/services:

- Planned and emergency respite care,
- Socializations for the families that included monthly peer support sessions—activities included dinners, pizza and game night, fish fry and pool party, a picnic, and a back to school party;
- Focused discussions with access to presenters and expert consultation that could be made available, if needed;
- Access to social support and mental health consultation, if the need was identified, through the Project Director
- Computer access to encourage email correspondence among families

Services focused on children and youth:

- Tutoring available twice a week after school with transportation available;
- Peer interaction at the socializations including a party to get ready for school;
- Social activities for the Project youth at the Hub home that included time to develop a relationship with the caring adults in the hub home;
- Access to the computer provided to each family through the Project
- Opportunities for older youth to write for The Mockingbird Times while also receiving training and developing job readiness skills.

The reliance on a hub home in the Foster Family Constellation Project as a source of support for the parent and the children, was not included in other projects. The Foster Family Constellation Project has made a unique contribution by demonstrating an improved model for service delivery in the child welfare system.

The FFCP model that made respite care always available was a major breakthrough in comparison to the existing services. Foster parents who had tried to access respite care in the current system, needed to give several days notice and might learn that no respite care provider was available and could wait several days for possible respite care. The availability of respite care in the FFCP led to the stability of a child placement in each of two families and to improved parent-child relationships for all families that are described in the following chapters.



The Foster Family Constellation Project may be contrasted to two distinct, innovative service delivery models that have been implemented in different settings under different sponsorship. To establish a comparative context we will look at the Hope Meadows Project and Family to Family Initiative.

**Contrast to the Hope Meadows Project:** The Hope Meadows Project is a geographically contained, intergenerational, planned community in Rantoul, Illinois. The community was designed to provide a model of foster care and adoption for abused and neglected children that provides them with nurturing families and a caring community that includes caring senior “grandparents.” Families living at this site, are in a working class community where children walk and play in a common greenspace where the neighborly seniors are ready to spend time with the children. This project differs from the Foster Family Constellation Project in that the Hope project aims to create intergenerational neighborhoods to provide extended support to adoptive families and to create meaning and purpose in the lives of older adults. The Foster Family Constellation Project focused on foster and kinship care families, and did not limit services to families in one defined geographic neighborhood. The Hope Meadows Project and the Foster Family Constellation Project do have a similar focus in creating a caring community to promote improved social, emotional and academic outcomes for children.

**Contrast to the Family to Family Initiative:** The Foster Family Constellation Project differed from The Family to Family Initiative in its focus and stated goals, but there was a similar broad objective in both projects to develop a neighborhood-based child welfare system. The Family to Family Initiative, that began in 1992 through the Annie E. Casey Foundation, had much wider implications in the public policy arena in that it was an initiative that initially involved six states and was a part of each governor's agenda to improve outcomes for children in the child welfare system. The Foster Family Constellation Project was a demonstration project in one local setting in King County within one region of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

The Family to Family Project was intended to recruit families in more neighborhoods with the aim to place foster children in their local communities in a culturally sensitive context. The project intent was to keep some children in their homes with resources or if that alternative was not available to place the child closer to home as appropriate, with less disruptions in care, and less chance of re-entering care after achieving a permanent placement. The Family to Family Project also assigned social workers and allocated project resources to fund community based services within the neighborhood (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1998). The system changes envisioned in the Family to Family Project were to determine when in-home services might be safely provided and to bring children who might have been placed in group care back to their communities.

The Foster Family Constellation Project had two similar goals to the Family to Family initiative. First, the Foster Family Constellation Project shared the broad goal to reduce the disruptions in the child's placement and this was implemented in the FFCP through the provision of social and tangible support to the foster parents. Second, the Foster Family Constellation Project had a similar intent to the Family to Family Initiative to develop the capacity of the micro-community to meet the needs of foster children. The Foster Family Constellation Project has demonstrated a unique, innovative model to improve services to increase the well-being of children in kinship and foster care. The specific accomplishments of the Project are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

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## How well the Foster Family Constellation Project met the planned goals for children and parents

The Foster Family Constellation Project in its first year of planning and implementation succeeded in generating positive results for the foster parents and children. In this chapter, we describe the project results as related to the project goals. These can be very briefly highlighted:

1. The parents reported feeling supported in their roles as foster parents and were very satisfied with the availability and quality of respite care.
2. Siblings who had been placed together did remain together.
3. The services were culturally competent for the African American children and families.
4. Parents of the children who received tutoring reported that the children showed improved attention in class and increased concentration that resulted in improved grades in the majority of classes.
5. Parents and youth reported feeling that they had gained a new family through becoming less isolated and sharing their experiences with their peers in the project.

### **(1) Providing support to foster parents to improve child outcomes:**

Through the planned project activities that included respite care and family socializations, the foster parents reported that they received social support and shared parenting experiences that diminished their feelings of stress and isolation. The parents perceived that the time spent, on a monthly basis, at the hub home when they could talk with other parents was very helpful. The hub home parents also frequently contacted the constellation parents to remind them about the planned events and the constellation parents found these calls to be very supportive and stress reducing. Three of the mothers separately remarked that the conversations with the hub home parents helped them get organized, gave them time to discuss a parenting challenge, and reinforced that their

parenting was appropriate. The hub home parents provided affirmational support as well as tangible support in the form of respite care.

In the FFCP, there were three relatives providing kinship care and they did not have other adult relatives in the same household or even in the local vicinity, to draw upon as resources for respite care. There were also two non-related foster parents-- one cared for a brother and sister and the other cared for two sisters. The Project families all indicated that they did not have an extended family network that could provide respite care—or would provide respite care for more than a few hours at a time.

For these project families who were providing kinship care and for the families providing foster care, it was very significant to the families to have respite care available as often as they needed it. Their prior experience in the foster care system had been that they could request respite care but it was rarely available. In the FFCP, the hub home parents provided a monthly calendar so families could sign up for respite and several families also used respite on an emergent basis when it was very difficult for the parents and children to get along.

While the parents used respite care, they initially had to become comfortable with this service. When offered in February 2004, only one family immediately signed up for respite. The reluctance was likely due to several factors: parents were not accustomed to having respite, parents had to feel at ease with the two hub parents as caregivers to their foster children, and parents might have felt that the culturally appropriate model was not to seek and use help to care for one's children because after all that was a parent's job. The hub home parents welcomed the children to the home, provided them with an overview of household expectations and made the children feel part of a family through interacting with the children. Once the families began to use respite they returned and several families had their children stay overnight, and two teens stayed when the foster parent was on a weeklong vacation. The parents were very positive about their children's experiences while at respite and they found that the hub parents were consistent in parenting styles to their own. Parents even adopted the manner of interaction initiated by the hub parents. The children, including the teens became

comfortable in going to respite, and a child in each family asked at least once to go to respite care because it was a positive experience.

The following table displays the number of hours of planned and respite care provided per month from February through December 2004.

**Table 1**  
**FFCP Hours of Planned and Emergency Respite Provided 2004**

	<i>Feb.</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>April</i>	<i>May</i>	<i>June</i>	<i>July</i>	<i>August</i>	<i>Sept</i>	<i>Oct</i>	<i>Nov</i>	<i>Dec</i>
Planned Respite Care	55	105	156	241	395	146	566	143	144	130	112
Emergency /Crisis	0	0	40	28	0	0	19	0	48	0	0
Monthly Total of respite hours	55	105	196	269	395	146	586	143	192	130	112
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11 month total of Respite Hours = 2329</b> <b>Average monthly hours= 212</b> <b>Approximate number of hours per day=7</b>										

For two families, the immediate availability of respite care prevented a disrupted placement in each family. The regressive, acting-out behavior of one young girl was so taxing on the parents that they received two days of crisis respite. In another family, the loud verbal abuse of a teen prompted the foster mother to request and use crisis respite for an overnight stay for the teen. These two families would have requested their foster child to be removed had they not been able to use crisis respite. In one family, the behavior of the young girl changed dramatically in November. As a result of her increased behavioral and emotional needs, she was placed in residential care. She has continued to receive residential services. In the other family with two teen-aged sisters, a situation occurred at the end of the year that came to the attention of the girls' case manager. While the case manager was aware that there was a project family that provided respite care, the girls were not placed into respite care at the hub home, but were placed at a short

term foster home in another county. That home was close to where the girls' mother was living, and they had previously talked about returning home in December or January. The hub home could have definitely received the girls and provided respite care but that did not occur for some reason. In the future, if the Project's participating partners, children's case managers, and the cooperating agency, UJIMA, are all aware of the availability of respite care, then if a need arises, a FFCP child would go into respite at the hub home. This would place the child in familiar surroundings with familiar caregivers. There was another occasion in late summer, when one of the teens left her foster home and decided to go to the hub home. After staying there for a day, she returned to her foster home. The hub home served as a safe place for a teen to be in a holding pattern when she did not want to be in a foster home after a disagreement with a foster parent.

The hub home parents provided a source of support to the parents and they were also trusted and caring adults who could offer support to the children and youth. As indicated above when one older girl left her home, the hub home parents were available. The hub home parents became trusted adults to the foster children, if a child wanted to talk or if a child had wanted to report any home situation, difficult relationship, or troubling experience. The hub home parents became sufficiently familiar with each child to recognize changes in the child's behavior, attitude, or appearance. The hub home parents were caring observers who were aware and sensitive and could have offered protection to a child should it have been warranted. The hub home parents demonstrated that they could concurrently carry out these two functions: to actively observe and intervene, if needed, on behalf of a child while also supporting the parents in their caregiving roles.

Respite is a strategy that strengthens kinship caregivers as well as non-kin foster parents. The availability of respite care through the FFCP averted two disrupted placements that would likely be repeated with more families in the project. Maintaining these placements has avoided adding more children and youth back into the already overwhelmed child welfare system. The project helped those children to remain in familiar family situations and settings that were supportive of the children's racial and cultural identities. The children who remain in stable placements are also more likely to have

better developmental outcomes in contrast to children who experience multiple placements with the associated stresses and losses linked to disruptions and subsequent placements.

**(2) Keeping siblings together:** The five constellation families each cared for two siblings. The hub home parents also invited another foster family to attend group events. This family cared for the brother and sister of two siblings in a FFCP constellation family. The siblings were all able to play together at the hub home during the monthly events. To date, the foster parents have indicated that the support they are receiving encourages them to care for siblings and to help siblings to keep in contact with each other. The following table shows the age of the children and the number of placements prior to their current homes.

The siblings who were placed together have remained together except for the brother and sister who are currently separated as the younger sister has been in residential care.

**Table 2**  
**FFCP Children by age, number and years in placement**

Identifier for the child	Age (in years) at first placement	Number of placements prior to the current placement	Years in placement prior to this placement
TA	11	5	3
LA	12	6	4
JG	10	4	2
RG	12	4	2
TM	8	2	1
MW	7	2	1
DJ	10	1	1
EJ	8	1	1
E	6	1	1
E	6	1	1

**(3) Helping the children and youth to be connected to their cultural heritage and identity:** At this time, all of the children are in homes where they would feel comfortable with their cultural and ethnic heritage. The project foster children are all African American. Six of seven foster parents in the constellation

families are African American and one of the two hub parents is African American. The project is further supporting the positive family and cultural identity of the children through their placement with family members.

An aunt and uncle care for a brother and sister who were placed due to the biological mother's substance abuse related neglect of the children. A grandmother cares for a grandson and granddaughter as the children's mother neglected them. An aunt cares for two sisters. The situation of three of the families reflected caring relatives who were called upon when needed. The African American extended family has been described as a "latent matrix" with individuals who can be called upon when needs emerge (Riley & Riley 1993:169). Kinship foster care has become increasingly more evident in response to the problems of growing numbers of children in the child welfare system, declining numbers of available foster parents, and the interest in providing culturally competent placements for children (Wilhelmus 1998). Research on kinship care has shown that 61 percent of caregivers were grandparents, 21 percent were aunts and uncles, and 11 percent were siblings or other relatives (Gleeson, O'Donnell, & Johnson-Bonecutter 1997). Research has shown that kinship foster care minimizes the disruption that youth tend to feel upon removal from their parents' care (Crumbley & Little 1997). Children who are placed with relatives rather than non-kin foster homes, also experience more stable development and are less likely to have multiple placements (Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999).

**(4) Offering services including tutoring and other social and recreational activities for children and youth to increase meaningful connections to peers and adults:** The families have been offered mental health counseling, family counseling, and facilitated discussion time about family roles and relationships. While indicating an interest in these services, the families have not used the counseling services. The parents were very enthusiastic when they learned that tutoring could be provided. Tutoring started in March and resumed after summer vacation. Tutoring was either at the hub home or at the Garfield Community Center as that was convenient for several families. The tutor provided 8-16 hours of tutoring in a month and children received individualized attention as one hub home parent also helped. The children improved significantly according to the adults' reports as the children showed more interest in completing



homework and showed more attention in class. The monthly progress reports completed by the parents indicated that:

- Nearly all of the children were better at listening and answering questions in class.
- Most children improved in getting along with classmates.
- One young boy, who was initially very distracting during the tutoring, improved in his behavior so he could remain with the group and participate in the tutoring session.

At elementary and secondary levels of education, twice as many foster youth than non-foster youth had repeated a grade, enrolled in special education, or changed schools during the year. Youth who are at risk for school failure are also at high risk for substance abuse and violence (Maquin & Loeber 1996). The FFCP children show a similar pattern to other foster youth in that 50 percent are in special education and 50 percent find school to be difficult.

**Table 3**  
**Baseline educational data on FFCP children (n=10)**

Children in Special Education classes part or full day	Children receiving counseling	Children doing work at below grade level	Children receiving behavioral therapy or other therapy	Children who find school to be difficult
5	3	2	5	5

Overall, the students are showing improvements in their grades as they increased their grades in 60 percent of the classes from the previous grading periods. The children are in the primary grades and in middle school and the subjects as well as the grading criteria are not the same, so we could not compare grade point average.

Two of the teens worked on The Mockingbird Times and had a very positive experience of increased involvement in youth leadership and in job readiness training. They worked with the newspaper editor and followed through in completing specific writing assignments to improve their skills in expressing themselves. Each received a stipend for work hours and increased their work skills by learning to be on time, interacting with an adult, and following through to complete a task. Two excerpts follow from the

articles that appeared in the November 2004 issue of The Mockingbird Times, Vol. IV, Issue 11.

The teens have expressed their feelings about being in the foster care system:

... My life is not right. What is not right about it is that I have been suffering. Well, that is what I would call it. I just want to have a regular life without living in foster care. I just feel that I am different from others because I'm a foster kid.

My life is like a CD or hip hop. The reason I say that is because I am a foster child. Being a foster child could be a blast and the greatest experience of your life if you make it that way. Or being a foster child could be the worst and most hating thing that someone could let happen to their child. My experience of being a foster child is that sometimes I have both of these experiences... The reason I say my life is like a CD or hip hop is because a CD changes songs like we changed houses through the three years we have been in foster care. It's like every time a singer or rapper changes to happy, to sad, to mad to curious and so on. Every time we changed houses we had to change our personalities so that the people we were moving in with would like us. This is why my life is like a CD or hip hop.

**(5) Providing the benefits of extended family relationships to prevent disrupted placements:** The Project is meeting the intended goal to provide the kind of support that adults and children would experience if they had extended family available. The foster parents indicated at the first orientation that their family members did not necessarily assist them as relief caregivers. The overwhelming response of the parents and the children has been very positive in feeling supported by one another and of feeling like a large family. One of the young boys stated his feeling of having new family members, "I'm glad to have another family and home here." The foster mother of two teens said, "I don't know what I would have done without these people. We're just one big family now. I don't want it to end."

The extended family network has become a protective factor to provide care and emotional support, material support, and assistance to family members, especially African American children and youth in the child welfare system. One study involved interviewing caregivers of children who had been identified as resilient or as non-resilient (Johnson-Garner & Meyers 2003).

The family characteristic that was most critical for children to be resilient was

adaptability in family roles so the caregiver established clarity in being the parent. Less resilient children were in kinship foster homes with more conflicted relationships between the foster parent and birth parent. The caregivers of children who were less resilient reported having less social support from an extended family network. The caregivers of the more resilient children tended to draw more on the support of extended family members. The FFCP intent to create a micro community, that functions like an extended family should have the benefit of increasing the children's resilience. This first year of the project has not had adequate time to implement some measures to assess resilience. In the future, in the implementation of this project, we will add a measure to assess resilience to identify if the micro community supports children in developing resilience.

The time that the children have been spending in respite care at the hub home has given them opportunities to interact with the hub home parents. The children have seen that rules in the hub home were consistent with rules in their own homes. The children were also exposed to different dynamics of interacting with other constellation family children who were older or younger than themselves. The children enjoyed their time at the hub home as evident in their request that they go to the hub home and their readiness to spend the night there. The hub home parents observed positive changes in the children's behavior. One young girl met two of the planned outcomes for respite care: she enjoyed time there and was ready to participate in group activities with other children. The hub home parent described the change in behavior in this child:

She was doing less parenting of her brother while at the hub home and was more engaging with adults. She freely shares how she feels and what is on her mind. She now seeks playtime with other children and can spend time alone with adults.

One of the younger boys has had a difficult time settling down in class and found it hard to focus when he initially came to tutoring. After weeks in tutoring twice a week, he was able to manage his own behavior, stop distracting the other children, and stay at the table for tutoring.

Another young girl who came to the tutoring sessions, has benefited from being with the other children and adults. She is learning to follow rules and to see

that rules apply to everyone. The hub home parents have had to supervise her behavior closely and set consistent expectations. She is working on building trust with the hub parents as she has found things that were not hers and hidden them. She is learning to take responsibility for her actions.

There has been more positive behavior change in siblings as well. In one family, the brother has consistently come to the tutoring sessions. The older sister has refused to attend tutoring and did not want to attend a social event at the hub home. She was expressing her control over her own behavior. She heard so much positive information from her brother about being at the hub home that she asked to go to tutoring. The children may vary in their readiness to visit and participate at the hub home, just as siblings in families may be more or less inclined to go to their relatives' homes. The hub home is presenting situations for the children to interact that are similar to having younger and older cousins interacting at an aunt's or grandmother's home.

One of the most significant changes occurred with the two oldest girls in the project. A.L. initially came to the hub home and did not interact with any of the adults or younger children. She sat alone during a dinner and did not engage in any conversation, even when asked questions. She had a weeklong stay at the home and two overnight visits and now carries on a conversation with the hub home parents. She has initiated comments and volunteered responses and does not just answer in one word replies. This teen has also had leadership development time in expressing her thoughts while working for The Mockingbird Times newspaper. The positive changes in her behavior were also observed at the newspaper office as she was initially not conversant when she started there. Over several months she became more comfortable in responding to questions and to talking with adults. This young woman left her foster home following a disagreement with her foster mother and later came to the hub home. She called her foster mother from the hub home to let her know she was safe and after a brief stay there, she returned home.

Another teen similarly improved in being much more positive when she was spoken to and being friendlier to the younger children in the hub home. She was also reluctant initially to go to the hub home, but after her initial stay there she was more than willing to go for an overnight respite stay.

Through the project, both of these teens have interacted with a young adult and more mature adults in the type of contacts that might have occurred in extended family relationships. The FFCP has nurtured these mentoring relationships in the caring adults that have led to positive results in the participating teens' more socially acceptable behavior. The Project has also provided many opportunities for the younger children to interact and to grow in their communication skills that are parallel to the ways that members of an extended family are sometimes present to encourage acceptable behavior in a child. The micro-community of an extended family support network has taken root among the Project families in this first implementation year.

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## The accomplishments and limitations of the Foster Family Constellation Project

In this chapter, we identify the conditions that contributed to the project success, discuss the factors that impeded the project progress, and identify the limitations of the project.

### **Conditions or Factors that contributed to the Project success**

There were several factors that contributed to the project success:

- Consistent vision and drive of the Project Director
- Communication between the Director and the hub home parents
- Local presence of the Mockingbird Society to increase the families involvement
- Parent readiness to move forward on project services and to request the services they needed
- Hub home parents' capabilities to consistently carry out project activities
- Proximity of the families that supported their peer support

The consistent vision and drive of the Project Director set a constant pace for this project ahead during the first year. The Project Director who is the Executive Director of the lead agency, the Mockingbird Society, worked to make this a cooperative endeavor among agencies with capacities to contribute to the project's success. The Mockingbird Society Project Director developed a working relationship with UJIMA Community Services to be the sole agency to recruit foster families. UJIMA Community Services has an established position in the local Seattle area as the premier agency in promoting more effective and culturally appropriate model for interactions with African American families. UJIMA is recognized for its efforts to address the issues of disproportionality of African American children and youth in the foster care system. UJIMA has also

increased the recruitment of families to provide kinship care for African American children and youth placed in the foster care system.

The Project director also completed the initial orientation for the families, suggested follow-up to explain the project to the families, and facilitated that the project families receive computers to increase their communication and networking. The Project Director communicated with the hub home foster parents to plan parent functions, set a system for reimbursement, and offer resources for the families as needed. The Project Director has also offered to conduct trainings for the families on topics suggested by the families. The Project Director also identified a new tutor that was instrumental in getting the tutoring started when it did because the intended lead tutor and additional tutor who had been known to Ujima were not available as expected.

**Local Presence:** The lead agency, The Mockingbird Society, is in a location that is convenient to the families. The new building that is home to the Mockingbird Society has meeting room facilities that were accessible and comfortable for orienting the parents and for dinners and functions for the parents and children. The presence of the Mockingbird Society in its neighborhood location is conducive to families attending meetings. The location is also conducive to the project being a part of the local effort so the Project does not carry any negative connotation of being a downtown or north end agency when the families live in South Seattle and Skyway.

**Parent Readiness:** From the first orientation meeting in December 2003 the foster parents have been pushing forward the project activities and services. Three of the foster parents are social workers. One works in an agency serving foster children, one works as a director of a residential youth program, and one works with an adoption services agency. Three parents work in other fields, one works in recreation, one in insurance, and one is an ESL teacher. The parents have identified topics of interest and have asked for tutoring for their foster children. They attended the monthly dinners and the picnic, fish fry, and holiday party and started networking with each other. One parent helped pack school supplies for the project children and two parents attended computer training.

**Hub home parents' capabilities:** The project kept its momentum because the hub home parents were very organized and consistent in planning and

holding events and encouraging the parents to attend. The hub parents were skilled and experienced caregivers and offered a welcoming home and a caring, age-appropriate approach to meet the unique needs of each child. The hub parents also made access to respite care readily available, without the need for the constellation home parent to complete paperwork for approval or to broker the respite care through a case manager. Access to emergency or crisis care was immediate when the families needed it, they called and the hub home parents were accommodating to meet the needs of the families.

The hub home parents' unique combination of communication and interaction skills and their commitment to the Project goals, made a very significant contribution to the success of the Project. The constellation parents acknowledged how comfortable they felt while in the hub home, how appreciative they were of the monthly social activities that were prepared for them, and how the hub home parents' style for parenting was supportive to their parenting. The hub home parents' willingness to identify their role, to work independently as well as to seek appropriate approval through the Project Director was essential in this year's implementation. The hub home parents' role is discussed in Chapter 4.

**Families proximity to hub home:** The Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP) has been successful in South Seattle, where the driving distance between the homes was generally under ten miles. This is a relatively close proximity to each other that should be considered as the distance to the hub home did not limit the parents from driving to the monthly social events and it did not deter the hub home parents from driving the children to and from school or tutoring as needed.

### **Factors that impeded the success of the Project**

The first start-up months of this project fell in the last quarter of 2003 which is often a very busy season for human service agencies that meet holiday related needs of children and families so the initial orientation for parents was delayed. This project experienced some common challenges when two essential agencies come together to implement a project. The Mockingbird Society Executive Director initiated a working alliance with UJIMA Community Services to recruit the foster families and to provide case management to the families. Four families



attended an orientation in December 2003. In April 2004, the project management team identified that the project had capacity for more families, but those families were not recruited. One family that had not been attending monthly social events did connect to the hub home and started using project services.

The hub home parents and the constellation families indicated that they did not have ongoing contact with a case manager at UJIMA on a regular basis. These families also had anticipated that they might have seen the UJIMA Program Manager at more Project events. The hub home parents functioned independently in talking with the FFCP Project Director, but did not receive consistent communication or direction from UJIMA Community Services. The hub home parents and the Project Director had anticipated that UJIMA might have offered topics for monthly trainings for the group of FFCP foster parents. Several parents were under the impression that there might have been some training for foster parents occurring monthly at UJIMA, but they were not informed. As the months passed, there was less visibility of UJIMA at the project events while there was ongoing participation from the Mockingbird Society Director. The key individuals at UJIMA who were involved in the Foster Family Constellation Project also had other demands to attend meetings, so maybe there were competing demands in their schedules that have kept UJIMA from attending FFCP activities.

In the first quarters of the Project, through April 2004, the Project management team of the Mockingbird Society Director and the UJIMA Program Manager did meet to go over project objectives and to identify how services, including tutoring were to be implemented. It became more challenging to have the partner agency attend meetings as requested by the lead agency. Rather than have face-to-face meetings, the lead agency Project Director and the UJIMA Director or the Program Manager communicated over the telephone about Project objectives and services during the last six months of the project. The momentum for the project might have been increased and the focused trainings offered to the parents might have increased if the agencies had face-to-face meetings that tend to generate more response from the participants.

## **Limitations of the Project**

The time spent in communication between the Mockingbird Society and UJIMA, during the initial months, might have been more efficient if the agencies had previously had a working relationship. It is to be expected that agencies each bring their respective work culture to an interaction and have to develop an appreciation for each other's values, project specific expectations, and customary styles of communication. The leadership team members on this project were committed to the project but it naturally took some time for a cooperative relationship to develop.

An explanation that the number of children being served was less than initially anticipated, was that the state of Washington Department of Social and Health Services changed its funding direction and decreased payments for the extensive special mental health and counseling services that some foster children needed. The Children's Home Society of Washington had developed a means to provide foster care including extensive counseling, medication management, and anger management counseling in foster homes on their campus, but the loss of the focused state agency funding made it financially unfeasible for that agency to implement the services for a hub resource home for other foster homes with children needing very intense comprehensive services.

The impact of the project was limited to the five constellation families and the hub home. The project could expand to serve more families-- through the development of additional constellations as well as the addition of one or two families to a constellation. The hub home parents' personalities and their approach in interacting with the other parents contributed positively to the parents' participation and could have sustained participation from one or two more families. The current constellation of families could incorporate an additional family. The number of the families in the constellation should also be based on the number of children in the families. There were 10 children in constellation families this year and the hub home had the capacity in scheduling respite care to have provided respite care for an additional two children. The number of families in the constellation should also be based on the number of foster children in the

families. It may be reasonable to expect that hub home parents provide services for 12 children and this could be four to six families in the constellation.

The outcome of the families coming together and supporting each other while also receiving some direction and focused discussion was determined to a large extent by the hub home parents' interests and willingness to work at their job. There would have been fewer positive outcomes reported by the parents and fewer positive reactions from the children if the hub parents were not so solicitous and hospitable in hosting the project families. This year's results suggest that achieving the intended goals of the project partially rested on the hub home parents' capabilities and efforts. The constellation activities such as tutoring and parent discussions would have been very limited if the hub home parents had relied on communication and training for the participating families to have been provided by UJIMA. This indicates that the results of the project might well be limited or restricted by the hub home parents' capacities so to maximize the results of the project, the hub home parents should receive support, guidance, and resources for planning and implementing project activities such as monthly family socializations, tutoring, and child centered activities. The hub home parents could receive this ongoing guidance or direction for their interactions with the constellation families through meetings, planned on a regular basis, with the Project Director and the UJIMA Program Manager.

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## The implications for project replication or expansion

Several implications for project replication or expansion are identified in this section relevant to: (1) the administration of the project and (2) the implementation of services for families.

**Recommendations for Project Administration:** In terms of administering the project, the agency partners might discuss and achieve some agreement upon the following recommended objectives.

- Recruit four to six families for each constellation and identify if families will be replaced if they do not wish to participate. The agency that recruits families should identify reasons why families do not wish to participate in the project. The agency that recruits families should also maintain contact with the families to provide a means for the parents to ask questions or receive information about the services offered through the project. The number of children in the families should be considered in arriving at the total number of families in each constellation.
- Continue to conduct the group orientation with the families so the services including parent peer support, informational meetings, social gatherings, counseling services, tutoring, and children's activities are explained. Provide time for the families to consider their participation in the project and arrange for a family from the first constellation to speak with potential participants in the project expansion or replication.
- Reach agreement on what information the Project Director communicates to the participating constellation families and the hub home parents regarding project services. Agree on the information and case management services that are offered to families by the partner agency that recruits families.
- The lead agency and partner agency will want to agree on the amount of guidance and support as well as who is responsible to provide this support to the hub home parents to plan and implement activities.

- The lead agency and partner agency will also want to agree on how often and in what way the hub home parents meet with project management team to have an opportunity to review attendance and participation in planned services including respite and tutoring. The hub home parents should also have a means to receive some consultation, as needed, to affirm or to support their interactions and communication with the constellation families.
- Develop a schedule for meetings of the Lead Agency Project Director or Project Manager and the partner agencies' Program Managers to review the services being planned and delivered, reformulate project objectives if needed, and reinforce and support the activities that are going well.

**Recommendations for Implementation of Project Services:** The hub home parents are the essential component of the services that are offered in this project. As a guide for future replication or for expansion to serve more families, we identified the important dimensions of the hub home parents' jobs. We recommend that prospective hub parents would be recruited carefully to meet these criteria that are focused in two areas social emotional characteristics and organizational skills.

Social emotional skills for hub home parents: The hub home parents would be expected to demonstrate social emotional warmth as evident in:

- Fundamental and foremost commitment to the safety and well-being of all of the children in the project;
- Commitment to welcome children into their home and to make children feel at home;
- Openness to involving the foster children who come for respite into the household routine;
- Ability to relate to each child and to allow the child space to interact and communicate at the child's pace;
- Genuine regard/concern conveyed to foster parents;
- Communication to foster parents to support them to attend group events and this requires persistence to reach some parents.

- Empathy with the constellation parents' situations in caring for their foster children accompanied with a willingness to provide assistance to the parents.

Prospective hub home parents would be expected to interact with children and their parents in the following situations:

- Expecting the children to participate in meal preparation or in a household chore (often letting the child decide on the task);
- Making room at the table, in the sense of literally and figuratively creating a space that accommodates the children and their parents;
- Expecting the same behavior from the constellation family children in respite care as the child in the hub home family;
- Planning events for the children or for the families to increase the families' attendance and participation in the activities;
- Supervising children at the home or at the playground while the parents talked.

Logistical support skills needed by the hub home parents: The hub home parents were called upon to arrange events and serve food to the families at the monthly events. In addition, the hub home parents arranged for tutoring and recreational activities for the children and arranged their time to talk with the parents at the parents' convenience. Hub home parents would be expected to demonstrate:

- Capacity to be flexible in the hub parents' schedules to accommodate the requests for crisis respite care from the constellation parents;
- Accommodation to the children's schedules to arrange tutoring and provide transportation as needed for tutoring;
- Flexibility to provide transportation for children as needed to attend activities at the hub home;
- Willingness to call parents and take the time to listen to them;
- Creativity and resourcefulness to help the parents access resources such as school supplies, a holiday lunch, holiday gifts for foster children.

Prospective hub home parents would demonstrate their support skills in any of the following ways:

- Rearranging plans to take a child for a weekend; providing planned respite care to two teens for a week; being willing to provide respite for two girls that were removed from a constellation home.
- Spending 3- 10 hours a month in telephone conversations with constellation parents about the project events as well as the parents' needs to express their feelings and situations to a caring adult ;
- Contacting community resources or restaurants or agencies so the project children could receive school supplies or tickets to events or a special celebration lunch.

**Hub home Parent Training:** Training should be provided in the following areas to fit the skills or expertise of the hub home parents:

- Communication and interaction patterns in children and youth (e.g. children who do not want to talk, children who test every boundary);
- Skills in creating the opportunities to support the children and youth to talk to each other and to the adults;
- Parent child relationship including parenting the young child and parenting an adolescent;
- Dimensions of the child welfare system that are relevant to foster parents and what parents should expect;
- Organizational skills in preparing and hosting events for the constellation families.
- Eliciting ideas from parents and arranging for speakers on topics of interest to parents.
- Safety and health related information to adequately care for foster children in the hub home.

Hub home parents should be trained and practice the following skills:

- Being open and non-judgmental to what the constellation parents say;
- Skills to distinguish what is said by children and the teens that requires follow-up and clarification and what can be minimized;
- Knowledge to call a caseworker or to support a parent who need to communicate to the caseworker about a child's behavior or the needs of the family.

**Additional recommendations for hub home parents:** There were several other characteristics that the hub home parents recommended for future hub home parents. The hub home parents should have a very stable and healthy relationship. The perceptions of the hub home parents who have worked with foster parents in different capacities and who know many foster families from different projects, not limited to this project, is that the hub home parents may encounter that some foster parents, are often dealing with some emotional issues and challenging situations. The parents may seek a great deal of affirmation or they may be very controlling in their behavior or may have other coping patterns. The hub home parents would do well if they could feel confident in their own relationship, and if the hub home parents could initially listen to parents, and have guidance to suggest resources for parents.

The hub home parents should know their own worth and value. The hub home parents will be positioned to encourage the children and teens to feel valued and to create the situations that will make the children feel valued in the hub home. This could be acknowledging the children for what they do and say, inviting the children to participate, recognizing that a child is participating or responding appropriately.

The hub home parents, in this project, had professional experience as a program coordinator and as a teacher. These jobs prepared them to be hub home parents. Prospective hub home parents should think of that position as a second job, as it took time and organization and planning. The hub home parents would recommend a two-parent home as one parent was often involved in an activity such as supervising tutoring while another parent provided transportation.

The hub home parents do well in this role if they are very flexible. They were often called upon to adjust when families who had not responded, showed up for an activity, such as a picnic or dinner or barbecue. One foster parent brought 11 people from the extended family to an event. The hub home parents recommend that prospective hub home parents work at being flexible as this supported the parents to attend and increased their participation. When the hub home parents welcomed everyone, even unexpected guests, this created a positive atmosphere and encouraged parents and children to feel at ease in the hub home so the project objective for parent support was accomplished.



The hub home parents were very self directed and communicated directly to the Project Director. The hub home parents would want to create a means to get the food and supplies that are needed for an activity and to bill the project. The hub home parents were very motivated and arranged for a discussion on "Helping your foster child in school and communicating with the teacher." The hub home parents also arranged for a self-care evening for the parents. Prospective hub home parents should be familiar with inviting a speaker and hosting a discussion for other parents.

In addition to the skills for the hub home parents, there are other dimensions to consider for expanding or replicating the program:

Planning for services: When the services that are planned for the families were explained to them, they were very positive. The tutoring services for the children and youth seemed to be a priority for the project parents and they requested specific times and locations. This has been an area where the parents seemed to readily agree on what they wanted, so it may be a good starting point to bring the parents together and to get specific input from parents, in a future project.

Families communicating: The hub parents assumed the task to call parents to tell them about the get-togethers for all families and to remind families to attend. The families communicated by telephone and far less frequently by email. In a new project, the families might not need to have computers for their communication but they might continue to use the computers to access parenting resources.

Respite Care: Before inviting families to be part of respite care, plan time for the families to get to know one another and to know each other's children. Expect that it will take weeks for parents to feel comfortable and to sign up for respite care.

Two procedures would be useful to identify early in an expansion or replication. Procedure for sharing information: The constellation families identified that, in general, they did not need to or want to disclose personal information about a child's history to each other or to the hub home parents. When constellation families were leaving their foster children in respite at the hub home, it would be sufficient for a parent to provide the following:

- contact information for the parent(s), including phone numbers and parents' location;
- relevant directions for the child's care during the time of care, such as food preferences or bed time routine;
- details about the child's care needs, patterns of sleep or wakefulness such as sleepwalking, use of any medications, allergies, patterns in communicating or engaging with others, such as hitting when frustrated or hiding from adults, that would affect the child's stay in respite.

Procedure for a Monthly calendar: The hub family should make a calendar available each month showing dates for a social get-together, a training or support session, a children's activity, and available respite. Parents can sign up on the calendar and can call to request respite time. The hub home parents reserve the right to block out days for respite care if they are unavailable and will also implement a plan for allocating days if many parents request more than a fair share of respite time. The families' requests for respite were always met and there were no issues of families' requests that conflicted with other families, but this could be anticipated in an expansion or replication.

## Chapter 5

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### The lessons learned from the Foster Family Constellation Project

The recommendations for planning and implementing an expansion or replication of the Foster Family Constellation Project were discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter contains some of the lessons learned in implementing this project with one constellation of families. The focus is on what was effective in the project interaction with the families.

Plan time to have the constellation families meet and get to know the constellation and hub home parents. The monthly gatherings were the planned mechanism to have the families get to know each other including the hub home parents. In planing for new constellations, allow the time for the interactions among parents to develop.

It took two to three months for some families to feel comfortable with each other and that was likely due to several factors. The project families indicated that they had become foster parents when the need arose within their families or because they knew there were so many children needing foster parents. The project parents shared that they had not always felt supported in what they did and they sometimes had to contact the state agency and follow-up in order to receive regular payments. The parents also indicated they felt somewhat isolated, as they spent much of their time in caregiving. Their foster children did not have close friends where the children were allowed to spend the night so foster parents were with their children much of the time, without much relief. They were very interested in the project, but they were also slightly hesitant. The families had not previously experienced any project that was offering them services including respite that came with no requirements and no built-in delays.

The families were willing and enthusiastic as they attended the first monthly gathering. The hub home parents invited all the parents and children to tour the

hub home and to feel welcome in coming to the table to share a meal. The families' interaction with each other was limited in the first meeting but increased in subsequent meetings in the volume of the conversations and in the amount of exchange with each other. The parents all enjoyed coming together and they talked with each other, even discovering that they had some similar interests and knew some friends in common. The parents spoke about looking forward to coming and that a group dinner was a highlight of the week. At the social events, the hub home parents continued to welcome each parent and child and facilitated time so parents could talk.

Having the hub parents plan and schedule these events and invite each of the parents to attend was essential. The hub home parents invested time in contacting each family and inviting them personally. The parents did not choose to initiate social gatherings in their own homes-- but they came to prefer and enjoy coming to the hub home to socialize and enjoy the peer support.

Allow time for the parents to get comfortable with respite and tutoring and to give their input on these services. The parents welcomed the idea of having respite available but all of the families did not immediately take advantage and use respite. This is very likely due to the families' desires to get to know the respite parents and to feel comfortable in the respite home. Another explanation is that the African American families in the project who were caring for their family members might have felt that they were carrying out what was expected of them. In this view, they were caring for their relatives and much as parents would feel responsible to raise their own child, the foster parents might have been somewhat reluctant to use respite care for their foster child. Whether the hesitancy was due to culturally influenced beliefs or to the parent's and child's preference, the respite care was not immediately used to the full extent in the first month but became very popular. All of the families used respite care during the 11 months of the project, the hours are reported in Chapter 2.

The families also sought tutoring services for their children as evident by two parents at the orientation meeting asking how soon tutoring could be offered. The parents gave input on where and when they wanted tutoring and this led to it being held in a room at the Garfield Community Center because one foster parent supervised the use of that space and saw it as convenient to several children's

school locations. Some of the children could attend tutoring if they were transported to the hub home and the hub home parents provided that service. The lesson from this year's implementation is in planning for future constellations, the parents' should have time and a means to provide input on services including respite and tutoring. In this year's implementation, the families did not offer many suggestions for monthly discussions or presentations, but they were appreciative of the topic discussions that were held. In planning and developing new constellations, the families should also be encouraged to ask for information or resources that could be discussed in monthly get-togethers.

The parents in this first constellation, were very positive about spending time with the other parents, as evident in over-staying the planned time at the hub home after the monthly social events. The parents would still be engaged talking to each other following the planned discussion, dinner and dessert. The parents also offered many positive reactions to the project as expressed by one foster parent:

This has been wonderful. I don't want to see it end. I can't tell you how good it made me feel to talk to Lisa on the other end of the phone... And you know that tutoring really helped the boy. He just shot right up and he liked school better. He liked it (tutoring) so much that his sister wanted to go too. Everybody needs this.

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