Northwest Institute for
Children and Families

Foster Family Constellation Project

Second Evaluation Report
Focus on Project Families

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Executive Summary

The Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP) model that provides a hub home to support five foster family homes has been very positively received by the families and has been succeeding in meeting the program goals. The model aims to correct a shortcoming in the child welfare system that has left foster/kinship care families isolated when caring for challenging children and youth.

Positive youth outcomes: The hub home parents have provided an average of eight hours of respite care a day that has supported the foster family parents/ guardians' caregiving. As a result, the children's placements have been stable and despite the very challenging behaviors of several foster children that tried their foster parents' patience and coping skills, none of the children's placements have been disrupted. The project model of the hub home to provide social support and respite care for a cluster of foster families has been very effective to ensure stability for the children in the project and shows great promise to be replicated with more families.

The stability of the placements has contributed to the children and the teens remaining in school and not facing school transfers due to new placements. Based on parent report, the children and the teens are improving in class behavior and are showing more attention in class. The majority of the project students who are in elementary school and middle school have improved their grades since the previous grading period. The students' improvements can be at least partially attributed to the FFCP tutoring and to the incentives that have motivated the students to improve their grades.

Siblings staying together: The siblings who were placed together in foster or kinship foster homes have remained together. The foster parents indicate that

the siblings do have some patterns of reinforcing each other's behavior or one sibling compensates for another's behavior.

Culturally connected youth: Three of the families are kinship care so the children are with their relatives and this reaffirms their family heritage. The other two family caregivers are African American who are caring for African American children so the children experience positive role models within their cultural group. The foster parents also work at the children having visits to their birth mothers that provides them with a family and cultural identify.

Increase youth connections with peers and adults: Through the project activities that include tutoring once or twice a week, the children and youth have found that they can talk with peers who have had experiences much like themselves and they interact with peers who look and act like themselves. These interactions tend to reaffirm their connections with other youth.

The children and the teens in the project have also connected with the adults, especially the hub home parents. The hub home parents encouraged all the children to participate in the group social activities and in any of the usual family activities at the hub home. When three of the children were having an especially difficult time and went to emergency respite care, the hub home parents were very willing listeners and were skilled in interacting with the youth so the teens returned home feeling better about themselves and their families. The project youth are likely to have more positive outcomes as they are experiencing caring relationships with positive adult role models (Moore & Zaffe,2003).[1]

 Provide the children and youth with the benefits of an "extended family": The FFCP hub home is succeeding in offering the support and the welcoming atmosphere that a relative might offer to extended family members. The parents and the children have remarked that they enjoy eating around the table together at the hub home. The children staying for respite at the hub home are interacting with the other children in a similar way that cousins might meet cousins at a relative's home. The hub home parents provide a consistent message and reinforce the same expectations for behavior as the children's

foster parents so the children experience some continuity and connection that is similar to an extended family network.

The parents have been very positive about attending the regular family social events at the hub home that have brought the adults and the children together. The parents are appreciating the peer support that is offered among the constellation families and the hub home parents. The hub home parents and the other foster parents have formed social networks that are the heart of an effective and supportive micro-community that should nurture youth who will have positive attachments and outcomes. Through the project activities, the adults and the children are learning that they share some common experiences and feelings that contribute to being a micro-community and to being "one big family" in the words of a foster parent.

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[1] Moore,K.A. & Zaffe, J.F. (2002) Building a better teenager: A Summary of works in children development. Available on-line:http:www.childtrends.org/pdf/k7brief

**Chapter
1**

How have the foster parents benefited from participation in the Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP)?

The start-up phase of the Foster Family Constellation Project (FFCP) was separately described in the first project evaluation report prepared in April 2004. The progress on the project goals was discussed in the first evaluation report and the goals of this innovative effort to improve the outcomes for foster children and youth are listed here:

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. Increase youth connections with peers and adults with mental health counseling for children and/or parents, tutoring services for children and youth, and additional social and recreational activities.

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.

This second evaluation report examines the outcomes of the project services including events, activities, and respite care that have been delivered to accomplish the project goals This report focuses on the results of the program services for the adult caregivers as well as the children and youth who have been participants in the Foster Family Constellation Project. 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. Four of the constellation families are headed by a single parent and one constellation family as well as the hub home is a two-parent family. The hub home family and one constellation family each have a child who is not a foster child. The project offered child-focused and family- focused services that 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

- computer access to encourage email correspondence among families

Children and youth focused activities/services:

- 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 express their thoughts in writing for The Mockingbird Times

The results of providing these services and the responses and the reactions of the family members are presented in the following pages. This first chapter focuses on the benefits that the adults received through their participation. The second chapter focuses on the youth outcomes and the benefits that the youth received.

The Benefits of Respite Care

The two parents in the hub home have offered and provided planned respite care for the children in each of the five constellation families. The Hub Home parents also provided crisis/ emergency respite care to the children in two homes. There were two features of respite care that made it especially beneficial to the parents and the youth:

1. Skilled and experienced caregivers in the hub home offered a welcoming home and a caring, consistent approach to meet the unique needs of each child;

2. Access to respite care was readily available, without the need for the constellation home parent to complete a form for approval or broker the respite through a case manager. Access to emergency or crisis care was immediate when the families needed it. They could call and the hub home parents were accommodating to meet the needs of the families.

1. Skilled and experienced hub home caregivers:

The parents who used respite care thought that it gave them some much needed relief but it also benefited the children in giving them a welcoming, comfortable place to stay. In addition, the parents indicated that their children did talk with the other children in the home and came to be relaxed and at ease with these other children. The constellation family parents identified several strengths in the hub home parents that helped to make respite care helpful to them. The constellation parent saw that the hub home parents communicated clearly to each child, set an expectation with each child, expected the children to act respectfully to each other and to the adults, and maintained a consistent approach.

Two constellation parents saw that the approach or the communication skills that the hub home parents used was effective so the constellation family parents adopted this approach at home. One parent caring for two siblings in her home commented:

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> *I could see what (the hub home parents did) and so I tried it and things went a little better at home.*

Another foster parent who cares for two sisters who have very different behavior styles was often challenged in interacting especially with one of the girls. She remarked about the qualities of the hub home parents:

> *They are so professional. (The parent) had S. (girl with challenging behavior) talk and work with her in the kitchen to prepare a snack and the hub parent gave S. a lot of praise and made her feel special and important. They (hub parents) just are so good at that.*

2. Access to Respite Care

The parents identified that knowing that they could access respite care was a tremendous relief to them. There were several reasons why the access to and the use of respite care became especially important to the families. One reason was that the foster families had indicated early in the project that they generally did not have the support or assistance of other family members who could take care of the children for any extended period of time or even for a planned period of time. One of the parents did have other family members who cared for her children on occasion so the parent had some relief as a caregiver. The foster parents tended to agree and to identify with each other that they were the responsible caregivers in their extended families. Two of the foster parents had previously been caregivers to other foster children in their care. One foster parent had cared for ten other children in her home over the course of many years. Two of the foster families had become foster parents when the mothers of the children were not able to care for the children due to their own mental health and substance abuse challenges.

The parents were aware that as foster parents, they could not allow their foster children to spend the night at a friend's home unless the family had completed a background check. So the short term relief of having a child or children away from the home for a night had not been an option for the families.

While the families had identified that having respite care available was a very welcome resource, the families chose to take advantage of it after they had a period of time to become familiar with the hub home parents. When respite care was initially offered in February 2004, the two foster children in one family spent a weekend at the hub home. The families' use of respite has increased in the subsequent months, and August had the highest use of respite as eight foster children in four families had 585 hours of respite care. The hub home provided a total of 1,751 hours of respite care in 7 months to 10 foster children in 5 families. This was an average of approximately eight hours of respite care a day.

Table 1. Respite Care February through August 2004

	Feb.	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*
Planned Respite Care	55	105	156	241	395	146	566
Emergency /Crisis	---	---	40	28	----	----	19
Monthly Total of respite hours	55	105	196	269	395	146	585
TOTAL	7 month total of Respite Hours = 1751						

The high volume of respite care provided in August is evidence of the families' needs for short term relief from their caregiving responsibilities for children who can be very demanding and challenging. The high volume may not continue at the same level starting in September when the children return to school and are away from the home during much of the day. But the access to respite care and to crisis care have been essential to meet the families' needs in order for them to continue as caregivers.

Accomplishing the project goal to maintain the stability of the child's placement

One very significant result for the families has been maintaining the child's placement and not disrupting that placement in the caregiving family. In three of five project families, this result only occurred because skilled respite care was

readily available and was effective to keep the communication and interaction open between the parent(s) and the foster child or teen.

The parents all benefited from the time away from their children that was provided by the respite caregivers at the hub home. This was especially helpful to three parents who indicated that the behaviors demonstrated by the foster children in their care were very difficult to accept, hard to live with, and more challenging than expected. The situations for each of the families was different but each posed a challenge for the caring foster parents who were experienced caregivers and in one family were also professionally educated in human services.

One foster parent was overwhelmed as the older of the two sisters who were in her care, was "rude and disrespectful." While the foster mother knew and had cared for other teens in her home, none had been verbally hostile as was this foster daughter. The teen was very angry as indicated in the words of the foster mother, "when she's confronted, she screams, she refused to talk, she slammed the door so hard things fell off the wall."

For the second foster family, the younger of two siblings acted out in the hope that if her behavior was bad enough, she might be able to return to her birth mother. She would soil herself and smear the walls and hit her head against the wall and scream.

In the third family, the older of two siblings chose to be very defiant of any order or rules that were imposed on her. She did not want to participate in any event or activity and wanted to be away from any of the other family members. The foster parent felt that she should be strict in setting limits with the teenager.

In each of these situations, the hub home parents provided either planned respite care or emergent/ crisis respite care or both for the child or youth who was acting defiantly or aggressively in the foster home. The children/teens spent varying periods of time in respite care as this ranged from approximately three hours to 146 hours when one parent needed a longer break.

When crisis care was provided, this was usually for at least one day or extended to two days at a time, in a month. Crisis care was provided to three foster children/ teens over the period of seven months. One family requested and received crisis respite care for their older teen in two months. The amount of crisis respite time ranged from 11 hours to 28 hours at one time when the family was very stressed in being able to cope with the foster children's angry or acting-out behavior.

The respite care that was provided had several benefits. The primary one was that the care was provided at the time that it was most needed for the duration of time that was needed in order to maintain the placement of the child in the home and to sustain the family as a caregiving unit for the foster child. This is stated in two parents' own words. The first came from a mother in a two parent home who had used respite care for her niece when the niece's behavior was unusually hard to manage:

> *(Without the respite care that was provided one weekend) I think we would have asked for her removal due to her behaviors- we felt at the end of our rope.*

The second statement of how the removal of the child was averted due to respite care comes from an experienced foster parent who found the emotionally charged verbal exchanges with the teenager in her care to be too difficult to repeatedly endure:

> *When (she) gets angry, she shouts so that it is too much. And we both have to calm down. If respite was not in place I would have had to let her go. If it wasn't for (Hub home parent) I would have asked to have her removed.. She's right in your face. I have had a lot of children in my house but never one who is so disrespectful.*

Additional benefits for parents

The additional benefits were that the parents were reinforced in their sound parenting practices, provided with time to let their emotions settle and calm, and

allowed time to prepare to interact with the foster child in their care. The examples below illustrate these benefits for the parents.

After a very challenging several days of trying to care for a niece in their home during which the aunt and uncle were also strained in caring for other children and their own ill parents, the aunt and uncle asked for emergency respite care. The hub home parents provided respite care and the effect was very encouraging to the aunt who indicated she felt affirmed in her parenting:

> *I so needed their reassurances that we were still good parents (albeit stressed out ones!) and their listening and calm demeanors helped take some of the crisis away.*

Other constellation parents also praised and appreciated the Hub home parents. Another parent had reached the end of her coping skills with the teenager in her care who would scream and yell and refuse to listen to anyone. The parent saw that respite provided a cooling off period:

> *(The Hub home parent) seems to be able to talk to her and get her to calm down. That gets it so we can both go on a little longer.*

The foster parents also indicated that another benefit was the peer support they gained from each other and from the hub home parents. This was expressed by a parent who said, "The social nights were so wonderful. That was just what we all needed."

Building a micro-community one hub home at a time

There was another benefit of participating in the program that was summed up by a parent who said, "This project has just been wonderful. I will be heart broken if it has to stop. We are just one big family. " It was desirable to create the network of support among the foster families that would be similar to the level of support that used to be found among extended families or in neighborhoods or communities where one family would take in a child from another family in times of conflict. At the onset of the project , the hub home was described as the home where a foster youth might stay for a short period of time if he or she was not

getting along with the foster parents. The foster youth have not left their foster homes and taken refuge at the hub home, but one young lady who did leave her foster home then returned to her foster home after spending some time at the hub home prior to returning to the care of her aunt. The hub home parents have also been instrumental in being available as a neutral and safe place for two teens who are gradually taking on some responsibilities that will be needed as they work out arrangements for visits with their mother and foster care with their aunt. The hub home parents and constellation home foster parents are experiencing a developing micro-community of support among themselves.

The Project is accomplishing the goal of building an extended family network among the parents largely through the efforts of the hub home parents. These two parents make calls each month to keep in touch with the constellation families, to remind them of planned group events, to offer respite times, to remind them about tutoring schedules and to arrange to transport the children to or from tutoring or respite. The hub home parents tend to average close to six hours a month in calls with the families that is in addition to time spent providing respite and time spent in face-to-face conversations with parents that occur surrounding respite time. Two of the constellation parents have found that the caring adult contact from the hub home parent has given them reassurance, support, and timely information that greatly assisted them in caregiving. A foster parent who cares for two grandchildren commented that "getting a call from the hub home parent made all the difference to me and helped me get my schedule straight and just helped me through the week of keeping up with these two. "

Another parent stated that the consistent contact with the hub home parent was always affirming and positive, "I can't tell you what it means to me. Having her call is always wonderful and this project is so good, I have nothing but good things to say."

The parents are forming helpful relationships amongst themselves that they have initiated and continued at their own pace and in their own time. The parents have been encouraged and supported by the Project Director at The Mockingbird Society to plan and carry out activities that they would find enjoyable or helpful for themselves and their families. They have been offered resources such as free

tickets and help with transportation. The families were also aware that they had the resources of mental health counseling available to them if needed. The parents, as a group, did not identify this as a need. But, several parents indicated that they also can access classes for foster parents through other sources, including Harborview Medical Center. The parents had an additional source for information that is specifically focused on improving their coping skills and their parenting of children with social and emotional behavioral issues including histories of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect.

The parents have been effectively communicating among themselves and have not received specific direction or regular guidance in developing plans for meetings or activities through UJIMA. The hub home parents have asked other parents and the children for input to plan events and get-togethers. They have capably taken on the tasks of planning and having successful activities including an evening focused on self-care, a picnic, school supply event, and Back to School discussion.

What are the outcomes for children and youth who have participated in the Foster Family Constellation Project?

There were 10 foster children and youth, in five families, who have been participating in the Foster Family Constellation Project. They range in age from 6 to 15 years old and there were three boys and seven girls. Two families each had a child who was not in foster/kinship care. The following services that were focused on youth were planned to meet several of the project goals: (1) to maintain a stable placement and to increase school performance; (2) to provide the child with meaningful connections to peers and to caring adults.

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 peers and the caring adults in the hub home;

Interactions with the adults in the hub home that would make the hub home a helping place or resource for the child/teen

Access to the computer provided to each family through the Project

Opportunity to write for The Mockingbird Times

Youth who have been in out of home placements, including foster care have not consistently performed well in school, have tended to fall behind their grade level, and have been less likely to go on to higher education (Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003; Martin & Jackson,2002). This is often the result of the children and youth being placed in more than one home during the course of a school year so they are transferred from one school to another school. This challenged the child to have regular attendance, to complete

assignments on time and to participate in class so the foster children tended to have lower than average grades.

The pattern that is observed with other foster children is also evident among the foster children in the FFCP. One of the 7th graders is reading at a third grade level and her goal is to improve one grade level. The student has a learning disability and qualifies for special education in math, language arts, written language and speech. Another student has an Individualized Education Program with a modified curriculum. The first evaluation report included some baseline data about the children's learning needs:

Table 2. Baseline data on Project children (n=6) Feb. 2004

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	3

The goals of the FFCP were to maintain the stability of each child's placement as well as to increase the child's level of performance in school. The project provided the services of a tutor who has worked with the children in four of the five families once or twice a week. The tutoring was held at the hub home or at a community center that was convenient for two of the four families.

The first evaluation report, that was written in April, indicated that the children who had attended tutoring were showing some early signs of improvement. At that time two children were starting to complete homework in a more timely manner and three were settling down faster to study. One child was showing noticeable progress in preparing and participating in class.

By providing tutoring, the Project provided a concentrated time for the young students to complete their work. The tutoring program was fully implemented in the last four months of the school year and focused the students to improve their attention in class and in completing assignments. The tutoring

program was probably responsible for helping the students who had the most difficulty in their classes to experience some success in getting homework in on time and in participating in class. The success that the students had encouraged them to work a little harder in continuing to complete their homework and to pay attention in class.

The results that are reported in Table 3 indicate many of the students made an improvement in their grades from the previous grading period. The improvements may not be attributed solely to the tutoring, but are very likely due to the positive direction that the tutoring provided to the students that got them motivated to work a little harder. The project also provided a financial incentive for students to improve their class performance to improve their grades. The incentive program certainly encouraged the students as they could earn money for each A,B, or C they received. At the Back to School event that the families attended, some of the students were actually talking about trying to do well in this upcoming school year so they could earn more money.

Table 3. FFCP Students grade summaries for June 2004

Student	Subject 1	Change from previous grading period	Subject 2	Change from prev. grade period	Subject 3	Change from prev. grade period	Subject 4	Change from prev. grade period
A	At standard	+	At standard	+	At standard	+	At standard	=
B	Above	=	At standard	=	Above standard	+	Above standard	+
C	At standard	=	Above standard	+	At standard	+	At standard	+
D	Above Average	=	Above Average	+	Above Average	=	Below	=
E	Above	+	Above	=	Above	+	Above	=
F	Above	+	Above	=	Above	+	Above	=

+ shows that the grade was higher in the last grading period compared to the previous period; = means that the student's grade was the same in the last two grading periods. The terms "at standard" and "above standard" are used on the elementary school students' grade reports and "above average" was applied for the middle school students to correspond to work that was higher than a C average.

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 the table represents a way of categorizing the similar subjects that the children took and the patterns of receiving the same grade or receiving a higher grade in the class for the final grade period at the end of the school year.

The majority of the children and teens improved their school performance as indicated by higher grades in the last grading period of the year compared to the preceding period. Two children were performing above average and continued to work at an above average level. The parents reported that the children and the teens were also paying increased attention in class.

Another success is that the FFCP has provided support to a teen who has struggled with school and has previously not consented to be assessed for special needs and/or a learning disability. She recently agreed to complete the assessment process. This may label her as needing special assistance, but would lead to her having a modified curriculum and to focused instruction that would help her to learn and to experience some success in a classroom environment.

<u>Accomplishing the goal of maintaining a stable placement</u>

The students benefited beyond the improvements that were shown in their grades. They were maintained in stable placements and that allowed them to continue in their schools, so they did not experience a disruption in placement or a school transfer. Three of the children/ teens exhibited angry or acting out behaviors that would have caused their foster parents to request their removal from the home except that the hub home provided respite care that eased the situation so the placement was not disrupted.

<u>Accomplishing the goal of connecting children and youth to peers and adults</u>

The Project is also succeeding in having the children and the teens meet their peers and to also meet and talk with caring adults in the hub home. The children range in age, and while the younger children readily seem to find ways to play together, the older children have also been made to feel most welcome and

appreciated in the hub home, This was evident when two teens in seventh grade indicated they were quite willing to stay for a planned visit at the hub home. The hub home parents elicited their participation in conversations and invited them to take part in preparing snacks and helping the younger children. They were asked to be part of an "extended family" that was being created when the foster children from more than one family came together in the hub home.

Two older teens also had the opportunity to come and work with the adult editor of The Mockingbird Times. The girls have been assigned to complete a weekly writing task that involved expressing feelings or ideas that required some thought and some research. The girls were developing work readiness skills in being expected to arrive on time and to complete the task as requested. In return, they received a stipend for their efforts. They have improved in attending regularly and in participating with more interest and enthusiasm in what they do.

How are the FFCP families similar to other families providing foster/ kinship care ?

This assessment of the outcomes of the Foster Family Constellation Project is conducted with an awareness of the history and practice of kinship care in African American communities. Kinship care was identified by an anthropologist Stack (1974) in observance of the extended family and kin networks that were observed in African American communities. Kin has been further described inclusively of relatives connected by blood or marriage or any persons with close nonfamily ties who form a family unit by acting as family toward one another (Takas 1993).

In the United States in the last decade, African American families have responded in developing and implementing kinship care to respond to the critical situations of more African American children entering and remaining in the child welfare system in disproportionate numbers. 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).

Kinship care should be considered against the background that members of the African American community have sustained multiple and repeated disruptions to the family unit through history. This can be dated from the Civil War, through the years after World War II when young African Americans migrated to cities and supported other family members remaining at home. In more recent decades several social factors including teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, and incarceration are factors that have forced separation of nuclear family members. 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. 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). The role flexibility among the family members in extended family support networks protects children when unemployment and lack of permanent housing create instability in their lives (Bengston 2001).

The children in the FFCP constellation homes are all African American and the majority are in kinship foster care. The project recognizes the families as part of a kinship system that has been historically strong, intact, resilient and adaptive (Logan, Freeman, & McRoy 1990:71). The relatives have been and are a resource as an adaptable and flexible protective factor for the children.

Research has shown that kinship foster care minimizes the disruption that youth tend to feel upon removal from their parents' care (Crumbley & Little 1997). One of the FFCP parents remarked that she had not expected to assume the caregiving duties for her niece and nephew but did so when the children entered the child welfare system and she thought it would be far better for them to remain with their extended family. But some youth have already incurred other moves, with kin or non kinship care placements, since leaving their parents' care. Kinship care may differ from the traditional foster care model in that the relatives providing care may rely on other relatives and there may be other relatives in the household that assist in child-rearing. In the FFCP, the relatives doing the caregiving did not have other adult relatives in the same household to draw upon as resources for relief child-rearing. The FFCP parents were especially grateful to have respite care available so they obtain occasional well-deserved relief.

The families in the project vary in their composition as do kinship foster families elsewhere. The family members living in the household and the extended family members who may be available to assist in household tasks, child rearing, and relief child care also differ among families so the family comes in many different forms with a variety of members. We recognize these diverse families exist and that they can adapt to meet changing needs (Brown, Cohon & Wheeler 2002).

In the FFCP, a sister and brother are cared for by their grandmother. Two other pairs of siblings are cared for by aunts/uncle and two pairs of siblings are cared for by a non-relative. Other 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).

There are some culturally relative roles that African American foster parents may more readily adopt than their white counterparts. The African American foster parents may feel more responsible to facilitate a relationship between the foster child and the birthparents, as indicated in a comparison study (Nasuti, York, Sandell,2004). Three families in the FFCP have spoken about having the foster children see their birth mothers and have helped in arranging visits. On one occasion, two foster children saw their mother briefly at the hub home. Two sisters are preparing to return to their birth mother as part of their plan, but the siblings from two other families see their birth mother only in arranged visits for the time being.

There were two other qualities that were identified among African American foster parents that did not have a corresponding presence in white parents. These were the characteristics of the African American parents to take on the role of agency partner and to also take the role as emotional developer of the child (.Nasuti, York, Sandell,2004). However, the FFCP parents depart from these two characteristics referred to in the published findings about other African American parents. The FFCP parents have functioned very independently of the agency, UJIMA, that provides them with culturally appropriate case management. The FFCP parents have also not expressed a particular focus on the emotional development of their foster children but they have talked more about their interests in meeting the educational and social needs of the children and how that might occur through the FFCP activities.

Previous research has been conducted with grandmothers caring for their grandchildren and reported that psychological distress among the grandparents was a cause of concern for the grandparents and the children they are raising. The events leading to the grandparents assuming care may have occurred

suddenly, such as incarceration, or have developed over an extended period of incidents. In either situation, the precipitating events could have been a source of stress for the grandparents (Kelley, Whitley, Sipe,& Yorker 2000). The grandparents may have also felt some guilt or shame over the factors contributing to their child's inability to successfully parent, such as drug or alcohol addiction. Other research has documented that grandparents may develop feelings of anger or resentment in assuming parenting duties for grandchildren (Kelley & Dumato 1995).

Additional research that has been conducted on grandparents in parenting roles has indicated that the grandparents may be socially isolated. The grandparents may also experience increased financial pressures incurred with raising children but their personal financial resources are declining if they have a fixed income or have decreased their work schedules to be available as parents (Dowdell 1995; Kelley,Whitley,Sipe,&Yorker 2000). In a two year study of grandmothers raising grandchildren where the families received a community based intervention, the grandmothers who reported fewer resources, less social support, and poorer physical health experienced higher psychological distress. In this study, nearly one third of the grandmothers had a distress score that was sufficiently high to call for further evaluation for clinical intervention. Limited resources contributed to the levels of distress and this calls for improving resources for kinship caregivers (Kelley, Whiteley, et al 2002). These findings suggest that strategies that strengthen grandparents' social support and family resources are essential and the FFCP is one such strategy to support kinship caregivers. If the kinship caregivers are not supported and served with projects such as the FFCP, the already overwhelmed child welfare system will need to absorb an even larger number of foster children. The children could face growing up in unfamiliar family situations and settings that were not supportive of the children's racial and cultural identities.

Research has shown that children who are placed with relatives rather than non-kin foster homes, experience more stable development and are less likely to have multiple placements (Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999). This finding reinforces the need for the FFCP that supports families so the children

have better developmental outcomes and do not undergo the stresses and losses associated with multiple placements.

The discussion showed that three of the FFCP families considered having a very difficult foster child removed from their home, and two of these were kinship families. This shows that the interactions created in the home can be exceedingly stressful even for relatives who may feel a stronger obligation to care for the foster child.

A small number of studies have examined the resilience of African American children but research on African American children who have developed resiliency in foster/ kinship care is not available. Resilience was defined as ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune (Werner 1984). In previous studies, resilient children could usually engage others, problem solve, and be independent (Werner 1994). Research has described characteristics common to some African American families that would tend to support resilience, such as valuing family cohesion and cooperation (Wilson, Tolson, Hinton & Kiernan,1990).

One study involved interviewing caregivers of children who had been identified as resilient or as non-resilient (Johnson-Garner & Meyers 2003). The parent interviews focused on adjustment in roles, relationships with the birth parents, communication and closeness, and caregiver support. 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 the more resilient children tended to draw more on the support of extended family members. The caregivers of children who were less resilient reported having less social support from an extended family network. This supports the goal of the FFCP to provide social support to the caregivers to help to sustain their role and the stability of hte child's placement.

What are the lessons learned from the Foster Family Constellation Project that can be applied in other projects?

The following lessons were evident in the past several months when the project has been providing services for the families. These are not the final lessons as there will be a third report and there will be conclusions in that report. The following statements are focused on parent and youth services.

<u>Allow time to have the constellation families meet and get to know the hub home parents</u>

The hub home parents invited all the parents and children to initially visit the hub home and to feel welcome in coming to the table to share a meal. At the monthly social events, the hub home parents welcomed each parent and child and facilitated time so parents could talk. At the picnic dinner, one hub home parent supervised the children that gave the other parents time to talk together. Several foster parents said they enjoyed those nights and that the hub home parents "did it right" to allow time for the families to get to know that they could relax if their foster children were to be cared for in the hub home.

<u>Allow for months of social gatherings to allow the families to get to know each other</u>

The social nights served the purpose of bringing the families together so they could talk with each other. The parents were empowered to plan and schedule these events and the hub parents worked to invite each of the parents to attend. 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 did not choose to initiate social gatherings in each others'

homes- but they came to prefer and enjoy coming to the hub home to socialize and enjoy the peer support.

<u>Build in time for the parents to get comfortable with the concept of respite care</u>

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 just "caring for their own" so they did not immediately perceive the needs to get someone from outside the family to help them. This feeling might have occurred concurrently with the reality that it would also be a relief to get some time away from caring for active challenging children.

All of the families used respite care at one time and three of five FFCP families used respite care when they had unusually stressful caregiving situations that they saw as extremely demanding, The FFCP families saw the hub home parents as capable of handling their complex situations and of providing the much needed support and assistance. Foster families in England demanded that if they received assistance it should treat them as equals and help them solve the "complex issues and states of impasse that often existed" (McDonald, Burgess, Smith (2003). The FFCP model is meeting that challenge. The FFCP model is effectively assisting families using the model of having respite caregivers in the hub home who are capable of caring for children in complex situations and who can render reassurance and peer support to the foster parents.

<u>Provide tutoring for students and offer transportation so students regularly attend</u>   The tutoring program was well attended by the project youth and should be continued in the next year. A second tutor would allow for the younger and older students to have more focused attention. All of the efforts to increase the students' class behavior are helpful given the evidence that children in out-of-home placements usually lag behind in academic performance.

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