



LEADERSHIP LESSONS

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How does the **Quality Parenting Initiative** support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?

**Q&A with Jennifer Rodriguez, executive director, and Carole Shauffer, senior director of strategic initiatives, Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), Youth Law Center**

This Q&A was created to help child welfare jurisdictions better understand the principles and philosophies behind QPI, and how children in foster care benefit when birth, kinship, and foster families are well supported. Answers are drawn from interviews with two leaders from the Youth Law Center: **Jennifer Rodriguez**, executive director, and **Carole Shauffer**, senior director of strategic initiatives.<sup>1</sup>

The [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) (QPI), a strategy of the Youth Law Center, is an approach to **strengthen foster care and improve permanency and well-being for children** by focusing on the ability of relative caregivers and foster families to provide excellent parenting and help children heal, grow, and flourish. QPI is built on the assumption that birth families, relative caregivers, foster families, youth, and the child welfare system must work together to achieve this goal for excellence, and that [those who experience the system directly](#) are best able to improve it. Since its



casey family programs

# How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?

inception in Florida in 2008, QPI has expanded to more than 75 locations in 10 states.

For an overview of QPI, see our strategy brief: [What is the Quality Parenting Initiative?](#)

## What are the core principles behind QPI?

Relationships are at the core of QPI. Our engagement in jurisdictions always starts with a few basic concepts:

1. **Children need quality relationships every day to thrive and recover from trauma.** Children can't wait for quality relationships while their family recovers or until they find permanency. The primary goal of the child welfare system must be to ensure that every child receives committed, caring, and developmentally-informed parenting every day.
2. **We need to treat caregivers differently.** If we want great foster parents, we need to support them in having strong relationships with children and their families, and treat them as valued and respected partners. We will not tolerate inadequate parenting or recruiting just for the sake of having enough beds.
3. **The people who are in the field doing the work know what needs to change.** Foster parents, caseworkers, and supervisors came into the system to make a difference in a child's life. They — and the birth parents and youth they work with — know what's working well and what's not working. If we ask and listen, they can come up with solutions.

## Why are these principles important for children involved with the child welfare system?

A decade ago, [normalcy](#)<sup>2</sup> wasn't being supported. Child welfare agencies were telling foster parents, "Treat

these children as if they were your own — but don't do anything without our permission." The science of child development tells us children in foster care are more similar to than different from our own children. Sometimes we stigmatize children based on trauma when, for the most part, these are regular children who happen to be in foster care and have experienced trauma. You can't go wrong by asking, "If this were my child, what would I want?"

When you look at what children who enter foster care experience, it is far removed from the things that we value about childhood — things that help children become productive adults. Feeling special, having the opportunity to experiment, and having a relationship with an adult who has big dreams for you — these are core elements of being a child. But all too often, that's not what our children in foster care receive because the system does not prioritize those critical pieces of childhood, or the children experiencing them.

## How are QPI jurisdictions making changes?

Every element of the child welfare system can be redesigned to prioritize relationships. The needed system changes involve not only recruitment, training, licensing, and retention of foster parents and other caregivers, but also identifying practices that encourage excellent care and removing any practices that interfere with that goal. Areas for examination include: placement selection and support; relationships between foster parents, birth parents, and social workers; investigations of violations; and whether and how children move from one home to another.

**Transition** from one placement to another is an important consideration. Should a child transition at all? I would not move my own child from one home to another with no warning and no opportunity to say goodbye to anyone. Are we moving children who are comfortable

At the core, we're trying to ensure that children have childhoods.

— JENNIFER RODRIGUEZ,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, YOUTH LAW CENTER

# How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?

and happy where they are, only because we have a policy that says we have to move them or because we have not adequately supported the caregivers? If a transition does have to be made, is it being made in a planned, developmentally appropriate way, or are we moving children at the last minute without any notice? Do they get an opportunity to say goodbye to people who matter to them? Finally, what happens after a move? Are children supported in maintaining relationships with the people they were living with, even if they no longer live there?

**Respite** is another issue many jurisdictions are examining further. Respite really means a break from something unpleasant. The word alone does not support normalcy. When non-foster parents talk about taking a break, they usually just mean that they want a “date night,” or maybe they want their kids to have a sleepover with friends so they can have some adult time. On the other hand, if foster parents need to be away for a few days, they often are required to use a formalized respite program. When foster parents have a medical emergency or family crisis, their biological children may go to their relative’s house, while the child placed in their care winds up staying with strangers or in a shelter. That’s incredibly stressful for the child in foster care and for the family as a whole. By changing policy, we’re telling foster parents we trust them with their children’s day-to-day care, and we also trust them with decisions about substitute caregivers for their children.

## How does the concept of normalcy extend to how we treat birth parents?

As a parent, when I drop my children off at daycare, I have an expectation about the quality of care that they will receive. I’m not worrying every minute of the day. Parents whose children enter foster care have even less control, and yet so many more concerns than if they

were simply leaving their child at daycare. Birth families deserve concrete information and regular opportunities for connection and conversation with their child’s foster family. We need to assure them that their children are being cared for appropriately and lovingly — and with respect for their birth family — while the children are living outside of their home.

## How do QPI jurisdictions encourage communication and relationship-building between birth parents and foster parents?

Jurisdictions in several states use **comfort calls** to provide information to the birth family when their child is initially removed. The placement worker calls the birth family from the foster caregiver’s home when the child is first placed. The purpose of these calls is to reassure the birth parent that their child is safe, share some information about the foster family and household so the setting isn’t as much of an unknown, and give the birth parent an opportunity to directly tell the foster parent anything that might help their child get through the first couple of days in a new home. Comfort calls facilitate a co-parenting approach, and support the birth parent/foster parent relationship to ensure that all adults have the critical information needed to navigate the transition.

Some jurisdictions are doing more formal **icebreakers or co-parenting meetings** very quickly after placement. Others are developing **formal co-parenting agreements** between the birth and foster family, describing how they will work together, how they will communicate, and how they will share in the care of the children.

Many jurisdictions also are implementing visitation strategies where the **foster parent is coaching the birth parent during visitation**. Foster parents may be encouraged to host visitation in their home rather than having family visits in a sterile visitation center or a room

We want permanency that’s really permanent, without children losing relationships with the important people in their lives.

— CAROLE SHAUFFER,  
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, YOUTH LAW CENTER

# How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?

at the child protection agency. Visitation is being re-imagined as parenting time, with parents jointly attending school or extracurricular events, doctor's appointments, or events in the community. In some places, foster parents are told upfront that they are expected to coach or mentor birth parents, and to maintain a relationship after reunification. That's a natural byproduct of developing a healthy co-parenting relationship — keeping in touch.

In other jurisdictions, specialized teams have been instituted to work with both families intensively for two to three weeks after placement.

## Are complex legal and policy changes required to implement these practices?

Most barriers to these kinds of practices are in people's minds, not in policy. For some of these changes, jurisdictions have had to create an agreement, hire staff, communicate an expectation, or conduct an audit to address it. But they didn't have to change the law. In most cases, jurisdictions haven't implemented these practices before simply because they never thought — or felt they had permission — to do so.

Historically, we have not approached things from a teaming perspective or an inclusive lens. We put foster parents in one bucket and birth parents in another, and tried to keep them apart. When you make your goal a relationship-based system, the opportunities to make small and huge changes to align systems become clear.

One concern in almost every jurisdiction is whether HIPAA policy or state and federal rules on confidentiality prohibit sharing information about the birth family with the foster parent. Jurisdictions have handled this in different ways. In some locations, the court has issued a standing order to share information among the parties. In others, foster parents are considered to be members of

the child's multidisciplinary team and covered under the same agreement as any other team member.

In a couple of jurisdictions, we have worked with agency counsel to [issue a formal policy memo](#) affirming that sharing information is critical to support excellent parenting, co-parenting, and mentoring, and that caseworkers are expected to do so unless specifically prohibited by statute. Of course, the best way to address information sharing is always to encourage a direct relationship between the birth and foster parent, which is what a relationship-based child welfare system does.

## Where does QPI fit into the safe reduction of foster care?

We do see QPI as part of the strategy of safe reduction. It's not just about the numbers. Numbers don't recognize the individual needs of each child. We may one day end foster care as we know it, but it's not going to be today or tomorrow, so we need excellent caregivers who are going to be there for children and their families in the meantime.

But we also believe that excellent foster parents can contribute to safe reduction. Reducing the number of children in care is not just about reducing entries — it also means reducing length of stay and preventing re-entry. Excellent caregivers help do this. They reduce length of stay by coaching and mentoring birth parents and preparing them for reunification. They reduce re-entry by providing birth parents with an expanded natural support network, oftentimes within their own community.

We should pursue not only more reunifications, or shorter time to reunification, but more stable reunifications. And if a child ultimately has to find another form of permanency, let's look at options that allow birth parents and children to maintain a connection whenever appropriate.

We must be willing to let go of power and control — to trust in the wisdom and invest in the leadership of families, children, and those in the field.

— JENNIFER RODRIGUEZ,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, YOUTH LAW CENTER

# How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?

And of course, ultimately, if we are ensuring that children in our system receive loving parenting, that provides the best foundation for their own parenting journey someday and hopefully buffers them from further contact with the child protection agency in later years. The best preventative intervention we can offer to our children and families already involved with child welfare is the creation of a caring community with strong relationships. And that's what we have the opportunity to do with QPI.

## What lessons have you learned through implementing QPI in the various jurisdictions?

Child protection agencies have to stay focused on the goal of excellent parenting, which can be difficult. The system, from the federal government all the way down to the local agency, is all too often organized around avoiding the next disaster. Focusing on what went wrong last time, and how we can make a rule that avoids that in every case, limits the potential for individual creativity and variation. For children, life is about meeting the

next challenge. It's about having the flexibility to make adjustments based on the individual person and circumstances.

Child welfare systems do not measure whether children and young people are happy. For those of us who are raising children, though, that is our ultimate goal. Do my children feel happy? Do they feel safe and secure in the world? Do they feel cared for, and do they have infinite opportunities?

Another challenge is that the system does not think of children and families as customers. There are not typically routine opportunities to consult with clients to find out whether the services provided by the system have been helpful, and how they could improve. But systems have to do that — it's a basic tenet of good customer service.

Getting our systems to focus on those elements, to ensure families and young people are supported, and to reimagine routine business operations, requires all of us to work together in new ways, and with nontraditional partners.

1. Adapted from interviews with Jennifer Rodriguez, Executive Director, and Carole Shauffer, Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives, Youth Law Center, on February 20 and March 4, 2019.
2. Normalcy means providing the opportunity for children and youth in out-of-home care to participate in the same age and developmentally appropriate activities and experiences as their peers who are not in foster care.

**P** 800.228.3559

**P** 206.282.7300

**F** 206.282.3555

[casey.org](http://casey.org) | [KMResources@casey.org](mailto:KMResources@casey.org)

