No Drama Discipline: The Need for Connection and Teaching

By Daniel J. Siegel, MD © 2015

The article below is adapted from Dr. Siegel’s blog (drdansiegel.com). Dr. Siegel will present an all-day pre-conference session and a general session at the 2015 NACAC conference.

An award-winning educator, Dr. Siegel has a unique ability to make complicated scientific concepts exciting. He is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and the author of many articles, chapters, and books on interpersonal neurobiology, brain development, parenting, relationships, and well-being—including New York Times bestsellers The Whole-Brain Child (2011) and No-Drama Discipline (2014) with Tina Payne Bryson, PhD; and Brainstorm (2013).

When I was a child, I used to marvel at the sound of the frogs in our neighborhood creek. Perched on the rocks, they would find each other and croak out an exhilarating symphony of amphibious songs. Meanwhile, their tadpole offspring swam in the cool flowing water below, their parents seemingly oblivious to their offspring’s experience.

A Need for Attachment

What makes us different as mammals from our amphibian and even reptilian cousins is something beyond just the hair on our bodies and the warmth of our blood. We mammals share attachment, the need for a close relationship between parent and offspring to connect and protect, to soothe and attune.

The magic of attachment is that our children internalize our patterns of communication with them, shaping the very structure of their developing brains as they move from the safe haven of our love to set out into the world from the launching pad of home. While the tadpoles do fine without their parents’ care, as mammals, our human family shares this need for an attachment bond.

Relationships are the defining feature of being human. As Robin Dunbar suggests, the more complex our social lives, the more complex our brains. In our Foundation for Psychocultural Research/UCLA Center for Culture, Brain, and Development, over the past decade we have been examining how the relationships we have within cultures—the repeating patterns of communication we have that link us together in families, communities, and societies—actually shape the structure and function of the brain.

These studies suggest that our experi-

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Da’Jour

Sweet and eager to please adults is how Da’Jour’s social workers describe him. Although he can be shy in larger groups, he likes being praised and receiving special attention from adults. Da’Jour loves to play games and sports. His favorite football team is the Baltimore Ravens, and he likes playing basketball the best. During down time, Da’Jour likes to watch movies (especially The Avengers; the Hulk is his favorite character) and cartoons (Power Rangers is tops). He also loves music and thinks Michael Jackson is the greatest. Born in 2003, Da’Jour is in sixth grade, where he likes all of his classes—math above all.

Da’Jour really wants a family who will support him through thick and thin. He is hoping for a family who will help him stay connected with a mentor that has visited him every week for many years. For more information, contact Danielle Brennan, Wicomico County (Maryland) Department of Social Services: danielle.brennan@maryland.gov or 410-713-3947.
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dences shape our neural architecture—and that our social relationships are one of the most important forms of experience that literally form who we are. And, the very essence of a relationship is communication. Communication is what connects one person to another, or one person to many.

With such a centrality of relationships in forming our evolutionary history and in forming our very identity—individually and as a human species—it might not surprise you to hear (or be reminded) that of all the factors in human life that predict the best positive outcomes, supportive relationships are number one. These research-proven findings include how long we live, the health of our bodies, the well-being of our minds, and the happiness we experience in life.

Relationships are the most important part of our well-being. It's that simple. It's that important. And it affects how we interact with and teach our children.

No Drama Discipline

After Tina Payne Bryson and I wrote The Whole-Brain Child a few years ago, we were struck at how the term “discipline” was often used in our workshops by parents as a synonym for “punishment.” And so we felt it was important in our next book to help clarify that the term discipline really means “to teach,” and that the recipient of our discipline is a student, not a prisoner.

In No-Drama Discipline, Tina and I explore this issue head on, using the Connect-and-Redirect whole-brain principle as our centerpiece to invite parents and other caregivers to really reflect on the nature of discipline, teaching, and relationships. The book’s primary message is that the most challenging moments that require our disciplinary action are the opportunities for deep teaching.

Louis Pasteur once said, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” One way of interpreting this phrase is that with knowledge and understanding, our minds can be prepared to optimize our response to the chance events that happen in life. In all of my writing or co-writing, I think of this phrase as a starting point. How can I help prepare the mind of a reader to optimize their experiences, to improve their inner understanding and interpersonal relationships? In the No-Drama approach, Tina and I have tried to use brain-basics to invite parents to prepare themselves for how communication shapes the development of the important integrative circuits of the brain at the heart of well-being, social and emotional intelligence, and executive functions.

In brain terms, a moment requiring discipline can emerge at any time, and the ones that involve limits and intense emotions can be the most challenging. As our brain has two fundamental modes—reactive or receptive—the key to a discipline interaction is to optimize the chance for learning by moving a child’s brain from reactive to receptive. Reactivity can take many forms such as the classic mild, moderate, or intense states of fighting, fleeing, freezing, or fainting. In such reactivity, learning will be limited. As Steven Porges suggests, we shut down our social engagement system when we are reactive.

Connecting first with a child’s state of mind is the key to moving reactivity toward receptivity. I remember this myself with the acronym PART; for the Presence, Attunement, Resonance, and Trust that are the part we play in connecting with others.

• Presence is our own state of mind to be curious, open, accepting, and loving.
• Attunement is how we focus attention on the internal state of another—not just on their outward behavior.
• Resonance is how we allow our own internal state to be shaped by what we sense and perceive in someone else—so it’s not really mirroring, but it’s resonating.
• Trust develops when another person recognizes and feels our resonance as it emerges from our attunement and presence, and they engage with us.

So when we enact our parental PART, we then connect with our child. Once he or she has moved from reactivity to receptivity, we can then begin the redirecting aspect of discipline, which will be how we teach about the particular issue unfolding at the time. Whether this is about not eating a whole cookie before dinner, not hitting a brother, or learning to stop a video game and come to dinner after the second request, connecting first before redirecting will make the learning more likely to occur.

Time-In instead of Time-Out

Our ultimate goal is to help kids feel more loved and nurtured—even when they’ve misbehaved—thereby making life and discipline less difficult for parents. Emotional competencies emerge from being present with children, especially during times of distress.

Having kids reflect on and talk about their emotions, what we are calling “time-in,” has been demonstrated in a wide range of studies to support the important development of understanding emotion. We therefore encourage parents to comfort and soothe and connect with their children during times of distress, and to reflect afterwards on their inner experience as a “time-in” with reflective dialogue, rather than punitively isolating them in a moment of anger and without any opportunity for reflection and connection.

Since the goal of discipline is to teach,
and to build skills so kids make better decisions both now and in the future, we need to pay attention to their emotions, and to the feelings behind the behavior. In fact, it’s often when they are upset or out of control that they need us most. Our suggestion is simple: Connect and Redirect. For us, that’s what discipline comes down to. Yes, we have to say no to certain behaviors and offer clear boundaries and structure as parents. But even as we do so, we always want to say yes to children’s emotions, and to their experiences with the world. As we put it in No-Drama Discipline: “We’re not saying that short timeouts are the worst possible discipline technique, that they cause trauma, or that there’s never an instance to use them.” We do believe, though, that inappropriate time-outs as they’re practiced by many parents end up being short on connection, and less effective when it comes to successful redirection. The times that are most challenging for us as parents—the times when we must discipline our kids—are the times we have the greatest ability to support and shape a child’s growing brain. So our goal is to help turn the hardest and most aggravating moments into what is most important and rewarding in the long run.

One of our deepest hopes for this no-drama approach is that it will invite a new conversation about discipline—one that will be good for parents and children alike to increase connection and optimize learning. We can all hope that with our prepared minds, we can help our world, one relationship at a time!

Connect and Redirect in Action

By Diane Martin-Husman, NACAC parent group coordinator

Dr. Siegel’s work on mindsight and Connect and Redirect really resonates with me as an adoptive parent. I have seen firsthand how a child’s brain shuts down when emotions are taking over. As Dr. Siegel explains, it’s important to help children learn by using both sides of the brain. On the right side, we make the more emotional or intuitive connections, and this is where we must connect first before working to change behavior. On the left side, we have the more logical and literal processing, and we target this part of the brain when we make suggestions and offer solutions to help children change behaviors. Dr. Siegel encourages us to look at both the physiological and emotional development of our children.

The Connect and Redirect strategy that Dr. Siegel proposes helps parents work with both sides of the brain and take into consideration the child’s emotional developmental process. The following example really brings the Connect and Redirect strategy home for me:

Pam and Terry adopted Jeremy and Alex from foster care, and the brothers are now 8 and 12 years old. Like many younger brothers, Jeremy likes to copy Alex and has a habit of following his older brother around. The two were recently at the playground, and Alex got frustrated when Jeremy wouldn’t leave him alone. He shoved Jeremy away, and Jeremy burst into tears. Although he wasn’t physically hurt, he was emotionally devastated that his brother would do this.

Pam, using Dr. Siegel’s Connect and Redirect strategy, realized she needed to connect with Jeremy’s right brain first. She provided emotional support, rubbing his back and talking to him gently about how much it hurts when someone we love isn’t kind. She helped Jeremy talk about his feelings, and as he talked she realized that he felt rejected by his brother. Pam knew Alex had taken on a parental role in the past and saw that the incident had triggered Jeremy’s feelings of abandonment, so she continued to provide comfort.

The next day, Pam thought she could do some work with Jeremy’s left brain. She talked to him about how his actions may have contributed and what he might be able to do differently next time—both to avoid making Alex mad and also to recover more quickly. They came up with a plan to ask Alex to clearly tell Jeremy when he needed a break, and she talked about other ways that Alex shows he loves his little brother.

Pam also helped Alex see the emotional side of the incident, and develop empathy toward his little brother. After they had worked through some of the emotions, Pam talked with Alex about how, next time, he could ask Jeremy for space or ask her or Terry to help Jeremy to stop pestering him.

I’m really looking forward to hearing more from Dr. Siegel about how we can use what we know about the brain to improve how we parent children, especially those who have experienced trauma and loss.

Molly

Amalia, who prefers to be called Molly, is a sweet and friendly teenager (born in 2000). She loves school and her favorite subject is math. Molly expresses herself through her artwork. She also enjoys swimming and playing kickball.

Molly would like to have a forever family who will teach her to cook, do arts and crafts with her, and advocate for her as she matures. She also likes animals and would love to have a family with pets. For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110.
Congress Introduces Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act

by Mary Boo, NACAC assistant director

Learn more about how you can join the efforts to make the U.S. federal adoption tax credit refundable by visiting adoptiontaxcredit.org. Keep up with the Adoption Tax Credit Working Group’s advocacy efforts by liking us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/AdoptionTaxCredit) or following us on Twitter (@AdoptTaxCredit).

In April, Senators Casey (D-PA) and Blunt (R-MO) introduced the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act (S. 950). The House bill (H.R. 2434) was introduced in May by Representatives Black (R-TN), Davis (D-IL), McDermott (D-WA), and Franks (R-AZ). If passed, the bill would make the federal adoption tax credit refundable as it was for tax years 2010 and 2011. A refundable tax credit would mean that many more families receive support in their efforts to provide a loving family to children in need.

The Value of a Refundable Adoption Tax Credit

As Senator Blunt explained:

Every day, families in Missouri and nationwide provide loving and safe homes for children in need through adoption, but unfortunately, many families do not have enough income to benefit from the adoption tax credit,” said Blunt. “I’m pleased to join Senator Casey on this bipartisan bill to make it easier for more families who choose to adopt.

Providing a vulnerable child with a permanent, loving adoptive home makes a significant impact in the life of that child. But adoption is expensive, and financial considerations should not prevent a family from adopting a child in need of a home. This legislation is a commonsense approach that ensures more families will be able to claim the adoption tax credit.

NACAC, as part of the Adoption Tax Credit Working Group, continues to work for a refundable adoption tax credit so that lower- and moderate-income families can benefit from the credit. Currently, many families, particularly those who adopt from foster care, do not make enough money to benefit from the tax credit at all. Data suggests that about half of all children adopted from foster care are adopted by parents whose household incomes are at 200 percent of the federal poverty level or lower.

Without a refundable adoption tax credit, families who make less than $30,000 won’t benefit at all, and those making $30,000 to $75,000 will often receive only a portion of the credit they might otherwise be able to claim. And, of course, there are many families who cannot even begin the adoption process without the support of such a credit.

What You Can Do

We encourage you to ask your two Senators and your Representative to become cosponsors of the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act:

1. First check to see if your members of Congress have already signed on to S. 950 or H.R. 2434:
   - Senate — www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/s950

2. For those who have signed on, we encourage you to send a thank you letter. You can find a sample letter at adoptiontaxcredit.org/advocate/sample-thank-you-letter/

3. If your Senators and Representative haven’t signed on yet, please call, email, post on Facebook or Twitter, or otherwise ask them to protect the adoption tax credit and make it refundable. You can learn more and find sample phone scripts or letters at adoptiontaxcredit.org/advocate/

Each bill has already attracted cosponsors from both sides of the political aisle, but we need to build a groundswell of support. Our hope is that this year Congress will realize that a refundable adoption tax credit is a great way to encourage the adoption of vulnerable children and to support adoptive families.

Mike

A caring and tenderhearted young man, Mike is active and intelligent. He loves being around his younger siblings and other kids. He takes kids under his wing and is great at helping them with their homework. Mike is well known wherever he goes due to his outgoing personality. He loves playing basketball and football, and was the team manager for the high school football team this year. Currently in 10th grade, Mike most enjoys math. He’s respected by his peers, and has made a lot of friends this year. After he graduates, he’d like to attend college and perhaps be a teacher or a counselor.

Born in 1999, Mike is ready for a forever family who is community oriented and enjoys sports. He needs a family who can support his strong bond with his younger siblings and help him deal with the grief of his mother’s death. For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110.

Mike

North American Council on Adoptable Children
Supporting Adoptive Families through Facebook Groups

by Mary Boo, Ginny Blade, & Christina Romo, NACAC staff

You can download a more detailed fact sheet about Facebook support groups at www.nacac.org/postadopt/CCNFacebookfactsheet.pdf. NACAC’s Community Champions Network is also available to help you create online support for adoptive parents. For more information, email Christina Romo at christinaromo@nacac.org

Around the country today, many adoption organizations are using private Facebook groups as a flexible, accessible way to enable adoptive parents to support one another. These groups allow parents to come together to share the joys and challenges of parenting children who have experienced loss and trauma.

NACAC started its Minnesota Facebook support group in 2009 as part of our statewide Adoption Support Network. Today, we serve more than 1,000 Minnesota adoptive parents through several different groups. In 2014, parents posted more than 45,000 messages, through which they shared information, asked and answered questions, discussed behaviors and proposed solutions, requested and received emotional support, and more. These families have developed a community they rely on daily for encouragement and support. As one participant explained, “This community means the world to me.” Another wrote, “The ASN page is there any time of day or night. I love it. And so many times it has made me feel like we can get through hard times because I know other families are doing it, too.”

Below, we explore how to create safe, private, supportive networks using Facebook. Given Facebook’s tremendous popularity, we found that it’s one of the easiest ways to implement online support. Its popularity does have some specific concerns, which we address as well.

The Value of Online Support

In recent years, families have gotten busier and many struggle to attend in-person support groups. At the same time, huge numbers of individuals are using social media—Facebook, in particular—for information sharing and community building. Taken together, these trends result in a wonderful opportunity to provide adoptive parents with needed support. Using a tool most are aware of and comfortable with, parents are able to get support when they need it and not just once a week or month at an in-person group meeting.

How to Start a Group

As you start an online group, you’ll need to think about the following:

• Your specific theme or purpose
• Who will monitor posts and how to address issues and concerns
• What ground rules to set to help participants
• How to reach families

Deciding on the Type of Group

Some organizations have open Facebook groups, which they use to post announcements about trainings and events, resources, and announcements. These have great value, but are quite different than a true online support group. An online support group should be a closed Facebook group, with participants approved by a moderator. With a closed group, participants’ posts are visible only to approved group members and don’t appear on participants’ walls or home pages.

But beyond open and closed, your organization has other choices to make about the group. Do you want one group for all adoptive families? Do you want a couple of groups based on issues families may be facing or for different populations? Do you want a group with a particular purpose?

Specialized types of groups include:

• Regional groups
• Groups for specific populations such as parents of teens, transracial families, LGBT families, type of adoption (foster care, international, private domestic), single parents, parents waiting for a placement
• Groups on special topics like educational needs, advocacy, particular disabilities or challenges
• Book clubs in which parents read the same adoption-related book every month and then discuss the book and how it relates to their lives

Before you launch a group, you will want to spend some time thinking about the adoptive and foster parents you work with and identify the group’s needs and culture, ways group members successfully communicate, and what group members have in common. As you launch the group, you’ll want to make your format and posts best fit the culture and needs of your community. For example, if your community members are more reluctant to share personal information with one another, you may want to create a group with more structure. You might have a book or article discussion group or post specific topics weekly for group input. If, however, you have a core group of parents who already know one another through an in-person support group or other adoption activities, you may be able to have a very open-ended group from the beginning. Even in communities where people don’t share their own details, these online groups can help people make connections and learn from one another.

Choosing Moderators

One of the most challenging aspects of running an active Facebook support group is ensuring that the page is successfully moderated. This can take more time than you might think. We recommend that you identify a team of experienced adoptive parents (whether on staff or volunteers) who will serve as moderators. Moderators need to know helpful resources, core adoption issues, special needs, the effect of adoption

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and foster care on the family, parenting strategies, and more. They also need to address problem behaviors or violations of the ground rules. Moderators should be responsive, respectful, supportive, encouraging, understanding, nonjudgmental, and positive.

Whenever possible, moderators should divide the workload—for example, one might moderate on Monday, another on Tuesday, and so on through the week. Moderators don't need to read every post, but they should review the page multiple times a day. Over time, as more experienced parents join the group, you may find others to add to your moderating team.

If moderators already have a personal Facebook page, they may want to create a new Facebook page for this group so they can keep their personal information private. Having a separate page helps them maintain a boundary between personal Facebook time and the support group's professional or volunteer Facebook time. If moderators don't create a new profile, they certainly should check their privacy settings carefully to be sure group members can access only what they'd like to share.

Establishing Ground Rules

In the planning stages, it is very important to set ground rules that you will share with all prospective members of the group. You’ll also want to share them periodically with the entire group as a reminder. We recommend the following, but your group may have more or different guidelines:

- Respect all members of the group—never insult another group member; it’s fine to disagree but politely and respectfully
- Maintain strict confidentiality—what is posted in the group is never shared with others
- Never use your children’s names and don’t disclose anything that could be hurtful or embarrassing for the child
- Respect workers, therapists, and others—do not use the group to insult or disparage others

Although the following are not part of NACAC's formal guidelines, they are general rules of behavior our moderators would enforce:

- Never use profanity
- Avoid politics
- Don’t promote or disparage any religion or belief system (or lack thereof)

Conducting Outreach

Most online groups will start small, and it will take effort to find families to participate. Having an outreach plan in place from the beginning is a wise idea, but outreach will need to continue regularly. We recommend:

- Notifying leaders of existing in-person support groups
- Asking adoptive parents to share information with others they know
- Sharing flyers and other information with county, state, tribal, or other adoption agencies and adoption support organizations, asking them to distribute the information to their families
- Sharing information with therapists and others who serve families
- Posting information on your website, with a link to join

Some of the best outreach comes from other adoptive parents who are part of the group. We encourage group members to tell other parents about how and why they value the online support.

Maintaining the Group

The key to running a successful group is the experience and commitment of the moderators. Moderators have to help develop a climate of trust and togetherness, while showing empathy and compassion for what other families are going through. Moderators can build trust by welcoming new members, being responsive to questions or concerns, reminding members that individuals can have differences of opinion and express them respectfully, and validating people's feelings. Once moderators have created a safe, respectful, and encouraging group, members will typically follow their lead.

Specifically, moderators are responsible for:

- Approving or denying requests to join the group; possibly removing individuals from the group—When we get a request to join our Facebook group, a moderator sends a message to that person asking about their role in adoption and explaining the ground rules. We only approve adoptive parents to join the group. If a group member becomes offensive or can’t follow the ground rules, the moderator would need to dismiss the person from the group as well.
- Reviewing posts, particularly to ensure the ground rules are being followed — Although moderators don’t review every entry, they do look at postings several times a day. They scan for themes, active discussions, and disagreements that could become a problem.
- Removing offensive, inappropriate posts or posts that violate the ground

Be Careful!

Although a Facebook group is private, it is still a very public forum and confidentiality is only maintained if all members of the group respect the group rules. All participants need to be aware that others in the group could copy their posts, take a screen shot, or otherwise share information they post. It’s important for all participants to make their own informed judgment about what they post. Moderators should regularly post a reminder to participants about the risks of any online group.

Our guidance to members includes the following: We ask parents not to use children’s names or other identifying information and to respect their children, their workers, and one another. Please remember that what is said here must be kept confidential. This group’s success has been built on mutual respect, support, and trust.
rules — Since starting our Adoption Support Network groups in 2009, we’ve only had to remove a few posts, but it’s an important role for a moderator. Moderators will need to delete posts that offer bad or dangerous advice, insult workers or other parents, or violate ground rules such as those using children’s names or pictures. In these cases, we recommend moderators remove the post, then send a private message to the participant letting her know why the post was removed and reminding her of ground rules.

• Offering suggestions and parenting tips — Moderators respond to questions and make new posts sharing their expertise and experiences.

• Identifying resources, trainings, events related to adoption or disabilities and challenges common in adoption — Especially in the beginning when the group may be less active, moderators post useful trainings, books, articles, and other resources that may be of use to parents. They also share ongoing news and events that might be of value to participants.

• Generating discussion — Again, especially early on, moderators have a great role in starting and maintaining discussions. They can post questions such as: What are the three best books you’ve read about adoption? What three things do you wish you had known when you first became an adoptive parent? What’s the best thing about being an adoptive parent? Posts such as these help the more experienced parents in the group get comfortable sharing their expertise as well.

• Encouraging group members and offering hope — Sometimes, participants just need a reminder that they are not alone or that things can get better. Experienced adoptive parent moderators can share their own success stories and encourage others to hang in there. They can also inform participants of the serious, ongoing effects of trauma and how trauma manifests itself in many children. Moderators remind parents to remain optimistic.

• Lightening the mood — Sometimes, the group can begin to feel negative or depressing, and the moderator can take the opportunity to change the mood. A moderator might ask attendees to name their family’s theme song, share the music that gets them through the day, or provide them with their favorite strength-based quotation. For the Adoption Support Network groups, we have created High Five Fridays, during which moderators encourage parents to post positive stories and family successes.

Although we encourage moderators to try to keep things positive, we don’t suggest groups avoid talking about serious challenges—some parents have nowhere else to turn and those struggling really need the help. If a conversation on NACAC’s Facebook group is not appropriate for a larger group discussion or might breach confidentiality, staff offer one-on-one support through Facebook private messaging or by phone.

Ensuring Self-Care
Moderating an adoptive parent support group online can take considerable time, and it is best to have a team of experienced parents sharing the responsibility. Since Facebook is a part of many people’s daily lives, moderators need to learn to set their own boundaries. It can be easy to look at Facebook while on vacation or during every weekend, and this can result in burnout for moderators. We strongly suggest that the organization hosting the page have a process in place to ensure moderators share the workload and have plenty of time away from the group when they need it.

Moderators can also spread the word among the group about the importance of self-care. They can ask participants to share their best tips for taking care of themselves and celebrate those individuals who share their best ways of relaxing and rejuvenating. NACAC’s group has a Self-Care Sunday once or twice a month, where moderators remind parents to take care of themselves.

Conclusion
Private Facebook support groups are a great way to enable adoptive parents to support one another and to build a sense of community. Careful planning and moderation can ensure a successful group through which members find support whenever they need it.

Seth

Seth is a friendly, creative youth with a wonderful imagination. His greatest love is superheroes! When given the opportunity to purchase an item, Seth almost always opts for a superhero costume or art supplies that he can make into a sword or a shield. And he loves to wear a new superhero costume all day long! Seth also likes playing basketball or football, going to movies, listening to heavy metal music, eating at Chinese buffets, and, like most superheroes, helping people. A sensitive, caring youth who was born in 1998, he has excellent manners and always aims to please. Seth, who is now in ninth grade, thinks he might like to be a police officer or a veterinarian one day.

Seth will be a great addition to the forever family who takes the time to get to know him. They’ll need to help him stay in touch with a sister he is close to. For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110.
NACAC Honors Child Welfare Leaders

At the 2015 NACAC conference in Long Beach (see back page), we will honor eight extraordinary individuals and one organization for their tremendous contributions to adoption and child welfare. We hope you join us at the conference to sing their praises in person!

Child Advocates of the Year
Denise Goodman, Ohio

Denise Goodman, PhD, has brought wit, wisdom, and reform to child welfare for 35+ years. She has worked with teens in a residential facility and served as a protective services social worker, a residential treatment coordinator, a foster parent, and a research and education specialist. Now a training specialist and independent consultant, Denise teaches parents and professionals across the U.S. and Canada on topics related to foster care, adoption, and kinship care.

Denise’s doctoral dissertation at Ohio State University examined the causes of adoption disruption. During her career, she has written curricula for professionals and caregivers, co-authored a section of *The Field Guide to Child Welfare*, and published articles and resources on issues in foster care and adoption including the Resource Family Guide, Child Specific Recruitment Tool, and Step by Step Guide for Targeted Recruitment.

As a member of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Family to Family technical assistance team, Denise works with agencies nationwide on recruitment, training, preparation, support, and retention of caregivers. As a senior consultant for the foundation since 1992, Denise has worked on system reform in many communities, and has helped reduced the use of group care and find more permanent families for children who have been waiting the longest.

Pat O’Brien, New York

Pat O’Brien, MS, LMSW, LTMN, is the founder and first executive director of You Gotta Believe!, an older child adoption and permanency agency and homelessness prevention program. Pat ran You Gotta Believe! for 18 years until 2013 when he took a sabbatical to serve as a Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiter. As a full-time recruiter, Pat now finds permanent parents for youth 16 to 21 before they age out of foster care.

Pat serves as president of the New York State Citizens’ Coalition for Children, president of the Family Builders Network, and vice president of Voice for Adoption. He is also on the Advisory Board of the Treehouse Foundation. Pat is a senior trainer with the National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness, and as a board member and consultant to the National Center on Adoption and Permanency.

As NACAC conference-goers well know, Pat advocates for using laughter and playfulness to alleviate stress, and teaches about the power of unconditional commitment—particularly to traumatized youth who need families. Pat also finds time to produce a weekly live radio broadcast called *The Adopting Teens and Tweens Radio Forum*, which airs inspiring interviews of people who were adopted as older youth.

Friend of Children and Youth
Judge Michael Nash, California

Joshua

“Joshua is such a sweetheart!” exclaims Joshua’s case-worker. An eager-to-please youth born in 1999, he has a great smile and sense of humor, and he takes pride in his appearance. Friendly and sociable, Josh loves music, learning about cars, playing sports (especially football and basketball), making origami, eating sushi, and building model airplanes. At school, Joshua is doing well in his ninth grade classes and works hard to improve and learn new skills. He particularly enjoys math and activity time. Joshua aspires to be a coach or gym teacher one day.

His dream for the future is to be in a forever family. He hopes to be adopted and would do well in a family with older children who can be role models, and he would love pets (especially a dog). For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110. ◆
Day is held in all 50 states and results in several thousand finalized adoptions from foster care each year.

A juvenile court judge from 1990 until his 2015 retirement, Judge Nash was initially appointed to the Los Angeles Municipal Court in 1985. In 1989, he was elevated to the Los Angeles Superior Court. From 1995 to 2015, he served as either presiding judge of the Juvenile Court or supervising judge of the Juvenile Dependency Court.

Among his many community commitments, Judge Nash has served as a member of the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care. Throughout his career, Judge Nash has actively sought to learn more about children who appear before his court and then developed and instituted innovative programs and system changes to address those needs. Judge Nash has been an incredible advocate for youth in the system and in care.

Youth Advocate of the Year

Precious Rooks, Texas

Precious Rooks and her mother calculated that she spent 2,764 days in foster care—and that’s not counting the four years she spent moving in and out of care. During that time, she was separated from her four brothers, regularly changed schools and homes, and worried about when the next change would come. At 16, Precious was adopted into a home where she could finally feel free to be her amazing self.

In 2014, after attending a NACAC youth leadership training, Precious returned home to Texas and immediately started a peer-to-peer mentoring program. The program pairs experienced youth with young people who were just entering the system “to help troubled foster and adopted teens in need of someone to really talk to, to make them feel like they are not alone.” Precious went on to lead a group of young people who trained foster and adoptive parents about the needs and perspectives of youth in foster care and has created a training model to help young people in care build a positive identity. In the future, Precious hopes to create an organization that provides supports and services for youth, while also empowering them to use their experiences to improve the system.

Precious is an avid writer who has completed a novel and a soon-to-be-released book of poetry about her experiences while in care. Precious regularly presents at conferences and meetings to “advocate for the voiceless.” She embodies what the Youth Advocate of the Year award represents, best stated in her own words: “I strongly feel that one person cannot change the world but changing the heart of one person can help at least one other child in need. I just want these kids to know what I didn’t at first. That despite all the statistics and odds against us we can make it, we can prove them wrong.”

Parent Group of the Year

Indiana Foster Care and Adoption Association

For more than 40 years, the Indiana Foster Care and Adoption Association (IFCAA) has provided a community for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents, public and private agencies, and other professionals who support families and advocate on behalf of Indiana children. IFCAA helped recruit and train local foster, kinship, and adoptive parents and led Indiana’s first advertising campaign to recruit foster families. The group created the first Indiana Heart Gallery program and redesigned recruitment materials for children waiting to be adopted.

IFCAA successfully advocated to end Indiana’s practice—since 2009—of placing adoptive families whose children were not Title IV-E-eligible on a wait list rather than providing adoption assistance benefits. The state’s 2014 reversal of this practice has been invaluable to adoptive families in Indiana.

Activists

Judy Cockerton, Massachusetts

Judy Cockerton is passionate in her conviction that children experiencing foster care deserve lives with dignity, belonging, connection, and enduring relationships. A foster/adoptive parent, she is the founder and CEO of the Treehouse Foundation—a nonprofit that seeks to inspire, implement, and support innovative child welfare practices to ensure children who have experienced foster care find lifelong family relationships in supportive communities. Under Judy’s leadership, the Treehouse Foundation has operated two primary initiatives:

- The Treehouse Community model,

...continued on page 10

Tikeria

A determined young lady, Tikeria describes herself as “sassy and sweet and a lot of fun!” She dreams of establishing a fashion line and owning her own fashion empire someday. Lately, though, Tikeria has also thought criminal justice might be a good field for her. When not planning her future, Tikeria enjoys watching The Jamie Foxx Show, playing mancala, and drawing. She also loves to express herself through dance. Born in 1998, Tikeria is currently in 10th grade.

As she explains it, Tikeria wants “a place to call home and a family of my own.” She would thrive in a loving family that will encourage and support her in pursuing her dreams. For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110.
NACAC Honors ...
continued from page 9

established by Judy in 2006, is a multigenerational planned neighborhood where families who have adopted children from care, their children, and elders live in an intentional community where they are able to invest in each others’ lives and support one another. The community embodies the idea that “it takes a village to raise a child.”

• Re-Envisioning Foster Care is creating a national vision where child welfare can be a place where children receive what they need to lead happy and successful lives.

Judy’s nominator wrote, “Judy’s creativity and energy seem boundless, and her work is also laser-focused on improving outcomes for children who are experiencing or have experienced foster care.”

Sari Grant & Diane Wagner,
California

In more than 30 years of working at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Sari Grant has dedicated herself to permanency for children. She heads the Placement and Recruitment Unit, which finds, recruits, and trains parents for children who cannot return to their birth families. Sari worked with the courts to create a blanket order allowing media-based recruitment for children in need of an adoptive family. She helped DCFS work with Wednesday’s Child, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids, A Home for the Holidays, and Good Day LA—resulting in thousands of children finding forever families.

Sari has also helped create and support other effective permanency programs including Camp Kinnect, a permanency-focused camp; Covenant4Kids, which matches children who want church connections to a “church family”; and the Kidsave Weekend Miracles program, which has found permanent connections for older youth. Sari’s nominator wrote: “Sari’s belief that every child needs and deserves a forever family has inspired her colleagues and staff and transpired into amazing and innovative programs to help children reach permanency.”

Before retiring last year, Diane Wagner spent 36 years in child welfare including emergency response, family maintenance and reunification, policy and planning, and adoption. The last 17 years she was in—and for 3½ years managed—the DCFS Adoption and Permanency Resources Division, which provides recruitment, training, and assessment of families for foster and kinship care and adoption; matches children with prospective families; and provides post-adoption services.

Diane led the division to attain the Human Rights Campaign’s All Children All Families seal of recognition for competency serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. As a member of the All Children All Families National Advisory Council, Diane has provided guidance to her peers across the country about building capacity to serve LGBTQ parents and youth.

As a nominator wrote, “Diane has a true commitment to permanence for all children. She relentlessly encouraged her staff, colleagues, policymakers, and the community to address barriers that might prevent even one child from having the opportunity to be connected with a lifelong family. She also diligently pursued excellence for herself and her staff.”

Robyn Harrod, California

Robyn Harrod, LCSW, is senior director of programs at the Southern California Foster Family and Adoption Agency (SCFFAA). In that role she has helped lead the agency to place for adoption a notable percentage of children on the agency caseload. This accomplishment stems in part from Robyn’s extensive effort recruiting LGBTQ families. Robyn’s recruitment work also led SCFFAA to become one of the first agencies to receive the All Children All Families seal of recognition.

Robyn has collaborated with Los Angeles County DCFS on many projects, including developing training for adoption social workers on partnering with the LGBT community. A frequent and knowledgeable presenter, Robyn has also served as consultant to help television producers with adoption storylines and has appeared on several reality television shows to discuss adoption from foster care.

Ms. Harrod also maintains a private therapeutic practice specializing in adoption-related issues and child and family therapy.

We at NACAC are humbled by our 2015 award winners. We hope you join us in honoring them for all they do for children, youth, and families.

Craig

“funny, cute, and loving” boy is how Craig’s caseworker describes him. He enjoys playing outside, where he’s a big fan of jumping. Inside, Craig enjoys playing video games on his VTech. Other favorite things include stuffed animals (especially SpongeBob SquarePants), hearts, arts and crafts, balloons, and pop music. On the other hand, he’s not fond of monsters, rats, or witches. He loves to eat and is not picky at all! At school, Craig’s favorite class is gym. He’s great at remembering people’s names and can read and comprehend at about a first grade level.

Craig, born in 1999, is open to meeting new families, and he needs a patient family who will love him forever. For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110.

Craig A

North American Council on Adoptable Children
New Indian Child Welfare Act Regulations Are Proposed

by Adrian Smith, JD, MSW

Adrian (Addie) Smith is the government affairs associate at the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). At NICWA, she works closely with tribes, tribal organizations, and mainstream child advocacy organizations to develop and promote policy that supports the well-being of American Indian and Alaska Native children and families, and strengthens tribal child welfare systems. She also works closely with tribes, states, and the federal government to promote improved Indian Child Welfare Act compliance and implementation. For more information about the proposed regulations, contact Addie at addie@nicwa.org.

Allie Greenleaf Maldonado, chief judge for the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, has an intimate knowledge of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), but not because of her time as her tribe’s attorney or because of her experience on the bench. Chief Judge Maldonado knows ICWA because ICWA facilitated the adoption of her son. Her life and her family would be incredibly different if, as she says, “good people didn’t follow the Indian Child Welfare Act.”

The adoption happened because of ICWA, Chief Judge Maldonado explains. “It is of the utmost importance that my son is being raised to be a good citizen of the Little River Band and the United States. When my son turns 18 and can vote about the wolf hunt in Michigan, he is going to understand why his people oppose the hunt. He will know that ma’iingan is our cousin. When he votes on the fishing and treaty rights, he will be informed because his elders have told him why the fish are so important to us and why they must be protected. He has the possibility now of becoming a leader in his community. He is potentially the next generation of tribal leadership.”

ICWA was enacted in 1978 in response to a crisis affecting Indian children, families, and tribes. Studies revealed that shockingly large numbers of Indian children were being separated from their parents, extended families, and communities to be placed in non-Indian homes. As a result, Congress enacted mandatory minimum legal standards to be followed by state courts and state agencies working with Indian children and families in state child welfare systems.

In 1979, one year after passage of ICWA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) published guidelines for state courts on implementation of ICWA. Since that time, however, many things have changed in child welfare practice and many courts have interpreted the requirements of this law counter to its language and intent.

More than 35 years later, there is still widespread non-compliance with the law. Out-of-home placement of Indian children is still much greater than it is for the general population. Further, Indian children continue to be regularly placed in non-Indian homes despite the fact that in many cases a suitable Native home is available. This is due in large part to the fact that state and private agency and state court compliance with ICWA is inconsistent.

To ensure ICWA compliance and that more adoptions end like Chief Judge Maldonado’s, on March 20, 2015, the BIA published a Notice of Public Rulemaking that proposes a comprehensive set of ICWA regulations. In February 2015, the BIA also published new ICWA guidelines, which, unlike regulations, are not binding. Nonetheless, this guidance on best practice under ICWA is effective immediately. This means that, while state courts and child welfare agencies wait for the final regulations they should familiarize themselves with the guidelines and incorporate them into their practice. The guidelines and the draft regulations are very similar. A copy of each is available at www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OIS/HumanServices/IndianChildWelfareAct/index.htm.

The proposed regulations clarify the interpretation of ICWA as intended by Congress and provide much needed clarity and consistency in its implementation across the country. Key provisions relevant to the adoption community include:

- Requiring a diligent search for extended family and other community members whenever a child is to be placed outside the home (Sec. 23.128–30)
- Ensuring that children are placed in homes that follow ICWA placement preferences, such as relative homes, and that practitioners are disincentivized from placing children in illegal placements that risk disruption (Sec. 23.129–31)
- Providing notice to all parties protected by ICWA (parents, extended family, Indian placement homes, and tribal social service programs) so that they are able to participate in placement decisions before they are final (Sec. 23.111; Sec. 23.123; Sec. 23.128)
- Providing a process for adult adoptees who have been denied access to their culture and tribal citizenship to reconnect while still protecting biological parents’ rights to anonymity (Sec. 23.134)

Many in the field of child welfare agree that such clarifications are long overdue. We anticipate that final regulations will be published at the end of this year and look forward to providing NACAC members with the details of their contents after publication.
Model Home Licensing Standards Would Facilitate Safe and Appropriate Placements

by Ana Beltran, JD, & Heidi Redlich Epstein, JD, MSW © 2015

This article is reprinted with permission from the January 2015 issue of Fostering Families Today.

Ana Beltran, JD, is an attorney and special advisor to Generations United’s National Center on Grandfamilies. For more than 15 years, Beltran has worked to support kinship families by advocating for supportive laws and by providing training and technical assistance on child welfare, housing, legal relationships, and other issues impacting the families. Heidi Redlich Epstein, JD, MSW, is the director of kinship policy and the assistant director of state projects at the American Bar Association’s Center on Children and the Law, in Washington, D.C. In her role as director of kinship policy, Epstein helped develop and currently manages the Grandfamilies State Law and Policy Resource Center in partnership with Casey Family Programs and Generations United. As assistant director of state projects, Epstein co-manages the award winning Permanency Barriers Project in various states.

Generations United, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA) recently released the first set of comprehensive model family foster home licensing standards. NARA, the national association of human service regulatory professionals, has taken the additional step of adopting them as its standards. Each partner, along with Advocates for Families First, a collaboration between the North American Council on Adoptable Children, the National Foster Parent Association, and Generations United, is currently working to promote the standards to states and counties with the ultimate objective that they use them to assess and align their own family foster home licensing standards.

The package of materials, which is available free of charge at www.grandfamilies.org, includes:

• A purpose statement
• Ten guiding principles
• The model standards
• An interpretative guide, which summarizes the purpose of each standard and provides instructions for compliance determinations

• A crosswalk tool, which is designed to assist states and counties in comparing and aligning their current standards with the model

Federal Law Flexibility on Family Foster Care Licensing and Wide Variation among States

Federal law allows states a great deal of flexibility in creating family foster home licensing standards, and consequently they differ dramatically around the country. States are required to develop standards that are “reasonably in accord” with recommended standards of national organizations. Although several national groups have developed guidelines for licensing standards, these new model standards are the only set of comprehensive national standards for licensing family foster care homes. They fill the previous void by creating common standards that work to ensure that children, regardless of the state in which they live, will be placed in homes that have met the same reasonable and achievable safety standards. The federal government can now reference a set of model standards for states, and the states will have guidance in their efforts to license appropriate, safe homes.

This project began by researching the various state standards around the country, because families were reporting that standards were posing unnecessary barriers to becoming licensed. Research confirmed the stories by exposing a variety of problematic standards, standards that had more to do with middle class ideals and the result of lawsuits. For example, prohibiting certain types of dogs and/or requiring that foster care applicants own a car.

Purposes of the Model Licensing Standards

Equipped with the state standards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the partners decided to create model licensing standards that:

• Fulfill the public policy intent behind licensing standards, which is to ensure that children in foster care have safe and appropriate placements.

• Fill the previous void in “national standards” by creating clear, practical, common standards that work to ensure that children, regardless of the state in which they live, will be placed in homes that have met the same safety standards.

• Facilitate the licensing of additional relative and non-relative homes by recognizing and respecting related and non-related foster parents as caregivers who are performing an invaluable service.

• Reflect community standards and be flexible so children in out-of-home care are placed in the best homes for them.

Elements of Model Licensing Standards

The partners used model language from the states, while also considering language from accreditation agencies like the Child Welfare League of America and the Council on Accreditation to create reasonable and achievable safety standards for family foster home licensing.

The model standards cover all the requirements necessary to license safe
and appropriate family foster homes. They include 14 categories of criteria necessary to become a family foster home—everything from physical and mental health to criminal, abuse and neglect background checks. The standards even include an “assurances” section, which cover areas like weapons safety after child placement, so applicants know the standards to which they will be held and can agree in advance of placement. Other than this assurances section, however, the standards are limited to the standards necessary to become a licensed family foster home and do not include placement or post-placement requirements.

Eligibility Standards
As an example of how the model standards are written, consider the “eligibility” requirements. In many states, applicants must speak English, have high school diplomas, and have enough income and resources to cover the expenses of a foster child. Instead of creating barriers like these to applicants who otherwise might be appropriate and suitable, the model standards require:

- Functional literacy or the ability to read and write at the level necessary to participate effectively in society. That means, for example, being able to follow written directions from a health care provider or child welfare agency, read street signs and medicine labels. Moreover, “society” is where the applicant lives and works. So, for example, if the applicant is in Little Havana in Miami, Spanish would be the language necessary to participate effectively.

- The ability to communicate with the child in his or her own language.

- The ability to speak to service providers and the child welfare agency, but this may occur through the use of family and friends as translators.

- “Income or resources to make timely payments for shelter, food, utility costs, clothing and other household expenses prior to the addition of child in foster care.” This standard addresses the public interest of not promoting applications from those who are only seeking foster children as income supplements, while also not limiting applications from only those wealthy enough to take on a child without monthly financial assistance to help meet the needs of that child.

Living Space Standards
The model standards contain similar common sense approaches to living space. Rather than requiring minimum, specific square footage, the model standards look at community standards and seek to ensure that the foster child has the same type of space as any other child in the home. A foster child cannot live in the dining room, when all the other children have their own bedrooms. But, if other children have similar spaces, a foster child could have a sleeping space that doubles as a sitting area during the day. Homes will be assessed based on a comprehensive homestudy that looks at safety, but that does not judge the home based on 21st century building codes. The standards allow for the licensing of appropriate rural, urban and suburban homes, provided they meet community standards and are safe. For example, if the home was built in the 19th century and is maintained in accord with community standards, the house will not be automatically excluded from consideration if it has lead paint or small bedrooms. The licensors will use the model standards, along with guidance in an accompanying Interpretive Guide, to determine suitability.

Criminal Background Standards
Another area that often acts as a barrier for licensing appropriate foster parents is criminal background checks. Violent felonies act as automatic barriers to licensing, as they should, under the federal Adam Walsh law. However, other crimes, such as catching too many fish on a fishing license or writing bad checks, have prevented otherwise suitable relative and non-relative applicants from becoming foster parents in many states around the country. Consequently, the model standards strictly follow the Adam Walsh law, but for other crimes, the model uses language from Illinois that provides eight specific criteria—including type of crime and the relationship of the crime and the capacity to care for children—to use in assessing whether a crime should act as a barrier to licensure.

Next Steps
The model standards are clear, practical standards that are not case specific, the result of litigation, or socioeconomic bias. They are the first step to facilitating the licensing of additional relative and non-relative homes, so that children live in safe homes with child welfare and court oversight, receive monthly support to help meet their needs, and can access services, such as child care. By living in licensed homes, children who live in the many states and tribes that participate in the federal Guardianship Assistance Program may also have access to the permanency option of subsidized guardianship.

The partners who created this model are working toward all states adopting it. Not all states will be able to implement the model in its entirety without any modifications, but the partners challenge states to use the model and an accompanying Crosswalk Tool to assess and align their standards with the model.

After adopting the standards, states should work with related and non-related caregivers and help them become licensed by providing support throughout the process. With improved standards and assistance throughout the process, more relatives and non-relatives will be able to provide families to the many children around the country needing safe and appropriate homes. 

The model standards are available at www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/Model%20Licensing%20Standards%20FINAL.pdf. The authors of this article are available to provide free technical assistance to states seeking to consider the model standards. If your state is interested, please email Ana Beltran at abeltran@gwu.org.
Why We Need to Prioritize Permanency

by Lexie Gruber

Lexie entered foster care when she was 15 years old and aged out without finding a foster or adoptive family. She has become a vocal advocate for finding families for all children and youth in care. The article below is adapted from remarks Lexie gave at a briefing on Capitol Hill in September 2014 titled Permanent Homes for Foster Youth.

"Lexie, you can’t return home." These numbing words rocked me, halted my world, as a social worker picked me up from school and drove me to the Department of Children and Families (DCF). I was now a foster kid, and completely paralyzed in fear. But the fear turned to excitement as I realized that I was finally free of my family. I thought that DCF was going to give me the loving family that I had always wanted so desperately. At first, I found a safe home with my Uncle Chris. But after a month of living with him, DCF told him that there were not enough bedrooms in his home, which violated department policy. A waiver could have been filed so I could remain in my uncle’s home, but policy carried more weight than permanency. Bureaucratic technicalities and an uncommitted social worker forced me out of my uncle’s home and into my first homeless shelter. When I moved in, the staff watched as I struggled to carry trash bags filled with the few belongings I had left. I collapsed onto my new bed—a graffiti-covered bed frame in a filthy room. I had lost everything, and now I was homeless.

I wanted to leave the shelter, but my social worker informed me that foster families preferred infants and toddlers to teenagers, and my age rendered me “used goods.” Many people thought older foster kids were riddled with irreparable problems and labeled us as delinquent without knowing our background. The only options for me were short-term, because foster homes for teenagers were in short supply. I could not understand why someone wouldn’t want me. At one point, I even begged my social worker to allow me to write a short piece about myself so that potential foster parents would realize that I was a really good kid, and offer me a family. But a foster family never came around, and I began to wonder why no one in the world loved me enough to save me from the shelter.

I could have bounced from one short-term foster home to another, but I would have been forced to switch schools every time I moved. I wasn’t willing to leave my high school—the only stable aspect in my life. But then I learned about the McKinney Vento Act, which would allow me to stay in the school I had started in, as long as I fell under the act’s definition of homeless. I chose a high school diploma over the remote possibility of a family.

I spent the next three years bouncing between short-term shelters and group homes. Staff at the placements were prohibited from forming close relationships with residents, and weren’t even allowed to hug us. Placements were staffed in rotating shifts, and I was never able to form a stable relationship with the adults who supervised me. To make matters worse, most of the staff would verbalize their contempt of the residents, complaining that they only dealt with us because they needed a paycheck. I didn’t understand why I was taken from people who didn’t love me only to be given to adults who could not care less about me.

Forming relationships outside of the group home was impossible, because DCF required extensive background checks on anyone I interacted with outside of the home. How could I explain to my friends that their entire family would have to undergo a criminal background check just so that I could come over for dinner? It wasn’t possible, and I was left with almost no caring friends or adults to support me as I struggled to complete my high school degree.

Ryan

Ryan is a funny, creative, intuitive, and active boy. Described as an “old soul,” he instantly connects with adults and likes helping others. Ryan enjoys singing in the school chorus, listening to country music, swimming, watching TV, playing video games, and attending church. One of his favorite movies is The Hobbit. Ryan also loves the outdoors—including fishing and hunting—and participating in Boy Scouts. Born in 2002, Ryan is currently in fifth grade and thinks he might like to be a teacher one day.

Ryan desperately wants a family who will teach him and guide him. As he says, “I can’t be a foster kid forever. I can only be me forever.” For more information, contact Torri Cowans at Children Awaiting Parents: torri@capbook.org or 585-232-5110.
Often, the group home residents were treated like second-class human beings. Cabinets and fridges were locked and we were fed during “feeding times” as if we were monkeys in a zoo. A strict “level system” allowed us to earn privileges, such as a 30-minute walk outside by ourselves, as long as we maintained excellent behavior. I could not understand why I had to act perfectly just to have the basic social privileges of a child. Why was I being penalized for having been removed from an abusive home? I felt like a wrongly accused offender spending time in prison for someone else’s crime.

I cycled through placements until I graduated from high school. I was still living in a group home, and would have no family to rely on when I left for college. How did you spend your summer before college? I spent my summer searching for a basement where I could place all my belongings that would not fit into the dorm room that would become my home.

The staff at the group homes were the only adults I knew, but policy prohibited them from contacting me when I moved out. As a result, I started my freshman year without any dedicated adult to help me acclimate to a college campus. I spent my first semester in an incredibly dark depression, crying myself to sleep and struggling to focus in class. There was no one to help me understand how to file my special needs paperwork with the school, and no one to help find an appropriate therapy program to deal with my debilitating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When the holidays rolled around, I was left with nowhere to go when the dorms closed. My social worker told me that my only option was to call 211 to find a homeless shelter, and I resorted to staying with my biological parents to avoid homelessness. My social worker knew that it was abusive, yet maintained that it was my only option. I did not understand why DCF would take me from my biological parents, only to resubmit me to their mistreatment. Last year, I found out that my social worker did not know the policy and that DCF was actually required to supply me with a safe place to live. But because of their inability to understand their own policies, I was left to be re-traumatized.

Going through college without a permanent supportive adult has been incredibly difficult. Somehow, despite all of my challenges, I’ve managed to maintain almost an A average and spent one year working for one of the most amazing members of Congress.

I know I am going to be successful. My dream is to one day work as a member of Congress and to represent the state that raised me. Inside, I know that will become a reality. But I will always wonder how much happier, how much more successful, and how much more full my life would be if I had a family that provided me the love that every child needs.

I could offer you a number of arguments on why we should invest in providing families for every child in our country. But instead, I wish I could package all the feelings I have as I tell you my story, and give it to you, so you could understand the lifelong pain that results from a lack of permanency. Family is the most organic unit in human life, and no government agency can replicate it. Instead of focusing on group homes, we must realize that there is no substitute for a family. I urge you to take my story and use it as fuel to work to ensure that no other child experiences what I went through.

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NACAC Membership

NACAC needs member support to work effectively on behalf of children who wait. All members get Adoptalk, as well as discounted conference, webinar, and advertising rates. Enhanced parent group, organizational, and national members also get discounts for multiple members or employees, as well as NACAC publication discounts. Join today!

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JOIN US AT THE NACAC CONFERENCE
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Changing the Picture of Foster Care and Adoption

As the previous NACAC conference attendees quoted here can attest, the NACAC conference is an incredible educational experience for professionals and parents touched by adoption. The conference will offer learning and networking opportunities for child welfare professionals, foster and adoptive parents, youth who have been in care or were adopted, and other advocates.

Key features of the 2015 conference include:

* More than 90 workshops on almost every adoption-related topic, designed to meet the diverse needs and levels of experience of all members of the adoption community

* Dr. Daniel Siegel’s all-day pre-conference session on July 29: “Mindsight and Healing Trauma.” Dr. Siegel will introduce mindsight as a powerful tool to change perception and response and help heal the effects of traumatic experiences on the mind, body, and relationships with oneself and others.

Pre-conference fees of $100 U.S./$115 Cdn. per person are separate from conference registration fees.

Register now! Early registration fees (received or postmarked by June 26) are $280 U.S./$330 Cdn. for members and $340 U.S./$400 Cdn. for non-members. Parent couples who attend together receive a discount, as do current full-time college and graduate students. After June 26, full conference fees increase by $55 U.S./$70 Cdn.

“I am walking away from this conference with new ideas and ... a really fresh approach to my work!”

You can learn more at www.nacac.org/conference/conference.html, where you can download a registration booklet, read descriptions of all sessions, and register online. Or contact NACAC at 651-644-3036 or info@nacac.org to request more information.