Evidence to adopt? Evidence to be adopted? With a Family Focus Empowered Transition, that’s the way it is done, and its importance can’t be overestimated.

One thing our agency has been very clear about since the beginning is that when a child (not a baby) is being adopted, they must be a driving part of that decision. Adults go first in an adoption, that is definite; but if the kids don’t believe that the family is the right one for them, we trust them. Children are not “given to” or “stuck with” a family. So we have always empowered them to make decisions about their own adoptions.

During each of the six Adoption Step Meetings in our Empowered Transition Process (see our website), our Child Transition Workers and Family Transition Workers would talk about the reasons they felt that their clients were confident in moving forward on the Steps. Then about ten years ago, we began writing down these reasons, and presenting them at the meetings. We quickly realized that if we were going to empower the children to make decisions, who better to come up with reasons to be adopted than them? In turn, the families should be given the same task. And thus began the formalization of our “Adoption Evidence.”

In the time leading up to a Step Meeting, a maybe-family is asked to provide several pieces of evidence showing why they are feeling confident and ready to move one Step closer to adoption. Because the adoption decision must never be behavior-based, neither can the evidence be. So, “Amy is doing so well in school,” is not acceptable. But, “We were so proud to go to our first meeting at the school, and help plan for Amy’s year,” shows a family doing what any parent must do for their child.

It has been incredibly eye-opening to hear the kids’ evidence, which they come up with and discuss in person with their Transition Worker before the Step Meetings. It gives insight into what they feel is important, and what gives them confidence to let themselves become vulnerable, as they move closer and closer to allowing their maybe-parents to become their forever parents.

All evidence is read aloud at the Step Meetings, so that everyone - child and maybe-family - can hear what matters to each other as they progress through the transition toward adoption.

Below is some of the actual evidence that children have presented to us over the years, in their own words.

Mike takes the dog out for walks. I think this makes him a good maybe-dad because he is taking care of the family’s pet. - “Barbara” age 11 (2007)

They helped me do my book report, because I didn’t know how to do one. - “Kate” age 12 (2007)

My maybe-mom is still giving me healthy food. - “Chris” age 11 (2008)

(continued page 2)
I can see my maybe-dads are concerned for my safety because when I was supposed to be at summer camp and I wasn’t, they took measures they deemed appropriate to make sure I was where I was supposed to be, and not walking around the city where I could get hurt. - “Donnie” age 16 (2008)

I felt like I fit in with the other maybe-relatives on Thanksgiving and overall. - “Josh” age 13 (2009)

We went camping and we had marshmallows and s’mores, and we went boating, and Ken let me row the boat! (When he was asked why this was evidence he added:) It made me happy. - “Eric” age 14 (2012)

Me and Mel are getting used to each other. - “Nathan” age 13 (2013)

I feel happy. I feel excited and it’s fun. Sometimes things aren’t fun: cleaning the cat’s poop, doing chores, doing homework, and following rules. - “Renee” age 14 (2014)

They show me they can be trusted by tucking me in, cooking, and making sure I have food to eat, and making chores for me (even though I might not like the chores). - “Nell” age 12 (2015)

They are annoying sometime, but I still love them. “Kim” age 14 (2015)

My maybe-mom is always there for me and keeps me safe. I feel like she treats me like her daughter. “Crystal” age 11 (2016)

One thing we have found interesting is that while this is just a sampling of evidence, over the years, the content and tone of the evidence from the kids has been consistent, in that the things they find most important are the things we may often take for granted. These are the things that a regular family does for and with their birth children.
FFAS Child Advocate Champion Award

Family Focus is happy to announce our newest Child Advocate Champion Award winner, Wendy Armstrong. We have known Wendy for many years, and through her work with Family Focus, we have seen first-hand her dedication, enthusiasm, and impressive work ethic. We asked Wendy’s supervisor, Diane Valentine, to say a few words about her experience of Wendy. She wrote, “Wendy Armstrong is a lifelong resident of Cayuga County. She has been employed as a DSS Caseworker for over 8 years, with a focus on adoptions for almost 5 years. During this time she has participated in hosting the Heart Gallery in Cayuga County, several National Adoption Day Adoptions (including two in 2016), and over 50 agency adoptions. Wendy is a tenacious advocate for her children and the families she works with. She is knowledgeable of many issues that adoptive families face, including legal hurdles, effects of trauma, and working successfully with birth families. Those of us who have the privilege to work with Wendy recognize her dedication to promoting permanency and Forever Families for the children of Cayuga County and throughout New York State.”

Thank you, Wendy, for being a Champion!

CMC To The Rescue... Again!

We were recently faced with a particularly difficult situation, involving a particular young man in our RAD! Program, who is from a particular county. “Joseph” is 17 year old, and like all 17-year-olds, he wants to get his driving learner’s permit. His future worker asked the county for his birth certificate, which the Department of Motor Vehicles requires. However, the only copy available is stamped “Social Services Use Only,” which the DMV will not accept. Joseph’s Future Worker tried to get an unstamped birth certificate for him, but was unable to because he is not Joseph’s legal guardian. In this case, only a county worker would be able to order one. At $45, a new certificate is not particularly expensive, but arranging for the funds through the county would require submission of a request, and then a wait time while it went through a whole approval process.

This is where the Chocolate Milk Club comes in. Without hesitation, Joseph’s Future Worker was able to take Joseph to the post office and get a money order in a matter of minutes. There will still be a wait time for the birth certificate to arrive, but thanks to the CMC, that wait can start now, since the money is not an issue.

As always, on behalf of the children and ourselves, we are grateful to all of our Chocolate Milk Club members for allowing us this kind of flexibility with their ongoing support.

Agency News...

30th On The 30th!... We are already in the planning stages for our 30th Anniversary Celebration, which will be held April 30th, 2017 at Antun’s Restaurant in Queens, NY. We will also be creating a journal of memories, so if you are interested in submitting something for the journal, contact Rich at ffasrich@gmail.com. If you wish to attend, details will follow in upcoming newsletters.

Hague Evaluation Completed... Our agency has completed our Hague site visit, and submission of all of our required paperwork. Now we wait for the Council on Accreditation’s review and recommendations...

Jack Brennan Speaks at Adoption Day... Nassau County held their annual multi-family National Adoption Day celebration on Monday, November 21, during which 17 children had their adoptions finalized. Nassau asked Jack Brennan, our Executive Director, to speak during the festivities. He presented the Family Focus philosophy that real adoption is like chocolate milk, which included a demonstration showing that once chocolate and milk are mixed together, they can never be separated. The demonstration was met with an enthusiastic response. If you don’t know about our “chocolate milk” philosophy, see our website!
On July 20, 2016, just days after completing our Certification Training to adopt, Cindy Pelletier-Sullivan died suddenly. We were all shocked when we received the news from her husband, Christopher Sullivan. We were surprised again when soon after, Christopher made a generous donation to Family Focus in his wife’s memory.

In gratitude, and to honor the fact that Cindy spent one of her final days with us at our Castleton Training and Meeting Center, we used Christopher’s donation to purchase the furniture we needed at that location to complete the new Cindy Pelletier-Sullivan Family Counseling Room. We are in the process of having a plaque made, and will officially dedicate the room once it is completed.

Christopher told us that “Dream Until Your Dreams Come True,” a lyric by the band Aerosmith that held meaning for the two of them, is inscribed on Cindy’s headstone.

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CHOCOLATE MILK CLUB MEMBERS AND DONATIONS

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CMC Donation Matches:
PSEG
AT&T/YourCause Employee Giving

(Donations are from 8/15 through 11/15)

End Quote:

“Do not judge my story by the chapter you walked in on.”
– Unknown
Winter 2016

Some years back one of the NY counties referred a teenaged boy to us. “Jimmy,” who had been adopted as a very young child, was later given up by his adoptive family. Jimmy was living in his third institution when we received his referral because of behaviors that kept getting him kicked out of wherever he lived, the type of behaviors that families do not wish to take on. Nonetheless, many of the foster children for whom we find families exhibit those kinds of behaviors.

But… as I read this referral I came to the part that had me reject this child immediately.

As a pre-teen, Jimmy had set fire to the curtains in his adoptive home, and the house burned down. Nobody, but nobody, but nobody will take on a boy – especially a teen – with that kind of history. Moreover, we wouldn’t even ask anyone to do so!

Fire is simply too scary.

However, we were just beginning our brand-new adoption readiness program – RAD! Relationships are Decisions – at that time. We hoped that if anything could make a difference for Jimmy, it would be this program.

Twice a month, as his Future Worker, I visited with Jimmy, who at first had been reluctant to join the program. However, over time we developed a relationship beyond the superficial. He talked to me about the fire. He talked to me about many things.

Last year, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids found Jimmy a family, and I continued working with him through the adjustment – sometimes rough – to the family.

As I write this, Jimmy is a happy, normal teen awaiting the finalization of his adoption, which should be any day now.

Could this have happened without us? I don’t see it.

The work we do is unique. Stories like Jimmy’s simply would not happen without us. And there are many more “Jimmys” out there who deserve a chance for a forever family.

We need your help to do this incredible work and do it the right way. Please think of us during your holiday charitable giving, or any time of year. And consider joining the Chocolate Milk Club for ongoing support - details are on the back of this letter.

On behalf of Jimmy and the entire agency, thank you, and I wish you a happy and joyous Holiday Season.

Jack Brennan, Executive Director
What is The Chocolate Milk Club?

Adoption, we tell our kids, is like chocolate milk: once that chocolate is mixed with that milk, there is no way ever to separate them again.

The use of this metaphor makes tangible, and reassures our kids of, the forever nature of adoption. Simply put, The Chocolate Milk Club is a community of like-minded people who agree with - and have chosen to support through monthly membership dues - the mission of Family Focus Adoption Services:

“The mission of Family Focus is to create and provide the confidence building adoption services that we would trust and expect for our own families and our own children.”

The Chocolate Milk Club members become part of a community that is insisting on the needs of the children – no matter what it takes. Through CMC donations, we are able to provide things for the children we work with that would not otherwise be readily available through their foster agencies, group homes, or residential treatment centers. Here are some examples of how CMC donations have helped:

• When our workers have meetings with our children, it is often better to hold these meetings away from their homes or residential facilities. The CMC allows us to take them to our community “offices,” such as McDonalds or Dunkin Donuts, to hold these meetings.

• Sometimes in working with our children, the need arises for spur-of-the-moment items, such as notebooks and drawing supplies, special “lock-boxes” for their things, toiletries, even once an MP3 player. With CMC donation money, we don’t have to worry about who will pay for these small things that can mean so much, we are able to respond to the need on the spot.

• Young adults who are in our Relationships Are Decisions (RAD!) program may be missing out on some of the “normal” things that their peers have. The CMC allows us to provide them with cellphones, so they can keep in contact with their workers, friends, and any potential family they are visiting with.

These are just a few examples of how your Chocolate Milk Club dues help Family Focus do our work. We hope that you will consider joining the club!

Chocolate Milk Club dues are just $25 per month, or $300 annually. You can pay by check, or go to our website and sign up with your credit card or PayPal – then you don’t even have to think about your automatic monthly payment. You may also choose to make automatic payments from your own bank. Make your payments to FFAS Chocolate Milk Club.

For more details about the Chocolate Milk Club, visit our website: www.familyfocusadoption.org
and click on the picture of the chocolate milk!