CLAIMING - THE HEART OF RELATIONSHIPS

We define claiming, in how it relates to adoption, as the discrete moment when a person decides, in their heart and in their head, that a child belongs to them. In our training we talk about the adoption claim being just as important and meaningful as the claim that a birth parent makes on their newborn: this child is mine.

The primary job of a parent is claiming a child until their future is settled (and beyond). A child who has experienced being claimed, and lived with that reliable, consistent belonging, will hopefully reach the point in their lives where they can claim themselves - develop the confidence to stand up for themselves, respect themselves, live with themselves, be their own person, and ultimately, to love themselves.

But what happens when there is no parent in the picture? When children in foster care are freed for adoption, they no longer have adults with any claim to them. The county social services agencies that have legal custody of the children can provide services for them, but it is impossible for an agency to claim a child. And it becomes impossible for children to claim themselves without having that foundation of knowing what it means to belong. This is a huge loss for children. Another mantra at Family Focus is that adults go first, and children respond to the adults. If there is no adult to claim a child, who will the child respond to? Our experience is that when a child has nobody, they become “stuck”: in their patterns, in their behaviors, and in actuality, in their very development.

What’s important is that this claim is not on a parental level, because the Future Worker is not a parent. Instead, the Future Worker claims the child on a personal level.

The Future Worker walks a fine line with this claim, because they must not cross over into doing things that a parent would do - going to baseball games, buying children presents, etc. We do not want to mislead the children into thinking the Future Worker is a possible adoptive resource. We stress to the children that as an adoption agency, we are constantly looking for families for them. So, instead of saying “You belong TO me,” as a parent would, the Future Worker says, “You belong WITH me, until your future is settled.”

This personal claim made by the Future Worker is one that the children can safely respond to. Claiming is the heart of relationships. We call the relationship that develops from this personal claim “The WE.” “We” means we are in this together. “The WE” is a safe, consistent, and powerful relationship that gives the child the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive. It also leaves plenty of room for the eventuality that there may be an adoptive family in the child’s future. But whether there is an adoption or not, this personal claim made by a Future Worker, and the development of “The WE,” provide the foundation for a child to some day in their future claim themselves.

For more information about Future Workers and The Family Focus RAD! Program, visit www.familyfocusadoption.org. Also listen to “The Value of Words,” an episode of the podcast The Moth presented by our Executive Director Emerita Maris Blechner, on claiming: https://themoth.org/storytellers/maris-blechner.
JOIN US IN CONGRATULATING… Maria Lauria, Director of Children Services at Nassau County Department of Social Services, who has been honored as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Nassau Division’s 2019 Social Worker of the Year. And in further acknowledgment of her work, NASW has just announced that Ms. Lauria has been selected as the 2019 New York State NASW Social Worker of the Year.

Historically, there has been a disproportionately high number of children of color removed from their families into foster care. Maria raised the question: what would happen if all the family demographic identifying information was “blindly removed,” and not considered when contemplating removing children. Because of her efforts, from 2011 to 2016 there was a 29% decrease in the number of children of color entering foster care. Maria’s blind removal process has taken root, and is now in practice on both the state and national level, and has been cited in numerous publications.

FFAS Executive Director Jack Brennan states, “Maria has supported Family Focus seemingly forever, and she has backed up our RAD! Program since its beginning. And - as a matter of fact - she, along with some staff, took the time to go through our "B" family training herself. She is a huge asset to us.” Because of Maria, Nassau DSS sends their families who are interested in adoption to take the “B” half of our adoption certification training, on top of the regular foster care MAPP training Nassau provides.

In recognition of her honor, and to thank her for her years of collaboration with Family Focus, the agency presented Maria with a bouquet, and a glass clock engraved with a quote by Nelson Mandela: “History will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children.”
When a child first goes into foster care, it is easy for us - and the child - to understand that it is because the child’s parents couldn’t take care of them. But when the child goes back and forth between home and care, or moves on to a second or third placement, a shift occurs in the way our culture looks at the situation. Why did the child come back into care? Why are the foster homes asking for this child to be removed? Doesn’t it start to look like there must be something wrong with the child? And if our culture see it that way, what might the child be thinking?

Throughout our many years of experience we have recognized that children in foster care blame themselves. “If only I had gone to school (or hadn’t hit the other children, or thrown a tantrum, or…) then I might be able to stay, or even go home. What’s wrong with me?” And our culture reinforces this by reacting to the child’s behaviors, rather than responding to the needs causing them. By not recognizing that these behaviors are often a result of the child’s circumstances, it’s very easy to view the child as being at fault.

Successful adoption relies on our ability to acknowledge that blaming is detrimental to any potential relationship, especially one between a parent and a child. The answer to making an adoption possible is a parent claiming a child instead of blaming a child.

We can’t ignore a child’s difficult behavior, and in fact, should hold them responsible for it. But the moment we approach a bad situation by trying to find out whose fault it is, we begin to delay making the situation better. When an adult blames a child’s behavior for their circumstances, they model an approach not only of anger, but of helplessness and of hopelessness, reinforcing the child's feeling of self-blame. The focus should instead be on solving the problem. It is more appropriate, and also very powerful, to be able to say, “You belong to me, so we will figure this out together.”

When a child is truly claimed by a family, the very act of claiming removes the possibility of having a “bottom line” or “deal breaker,” which if crossed, would result in a disruption (a child leaving a home before a finalized adoption), or a dissolution (a family returning a post-finalized child to the foster care system).

Bottom lines and deal-breakers are blaming reactions. A child may need more support than a family can offer within their home, and may have to live, at least temporarily, in a more supportive environment. But that doesn't mean that the child isn’t entitled to have a family.

**Claiming always overpowers blaming.**

*From “Why We Put the Blame On Others - and the Real Cost We Pay,” Harley Therapy Counseling Blog, September 10, 2005*
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**End Quote:**

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

- Marcel Proust

Please send correspondence to:

Family Focus Adoption Services
535 Broadhollow Road, Suite B-42, Melville, NY 11747 718-224-1919 www.familyfocusadoption.org

With training and meeting centers in Little Neck (NY Metro), Castleton (Capital District), and Liverpool (Central New York)
Folks,

Sadly, we cannot find permanent families for all the kids referred to us. Living with our multiply-betrayed (therefore angry and acting out) teens is simply too difficult for most families. Often then, when the kids turn 18, frustrated with living in foster care over so many years, they sign themselves out of the system. Many go and find birth families, and go to live with them. That’s not always the best option, of course, but it is far better than the options for the few who have no extended families at all.

Last month one of our pre-adoptive families, almost done with the process and ready to finalize the adoption of a boy who had recently turned 18, instead kicked this teen out of the family. The boy had nowhere to go, but he insisted on signing himself out of care. His home county then turned him over to adult services, and they in turn placed him in a fairly decent “shelter” for adults. The other residents were true adults – in their 30s and 40s. Our boy knew none of them and couldn’t really relate to them. He told us that he’d made a mistake and that he was terribly lonely. He told us that he spent one whole night crying. He has no one to help him, or guide him. And certainly no one to see to it that he is safe. He is, after all, now an “adult.”

This summer we are beginning to create a program for these kids transitioning to adulthood, while – believe it or not – we continue to look for families for them. Most of them have been in our “Relationships Are Decisions” program for many years and have developed a long-term relationship with their Future Worker. Locating in the city of Albany (reasonable housing expenses, great public transportation, plenty of places to work, and plenty of supportive programs for any problem), we will help these 18-year-olds (and older) transition to adulthood.

There is not a dime of funding that we have been able to find thus far to help us create this program. But we are doing it anyway. The need is too great to not do it.

This summer, I am asking you for donations specifically and solely for this new project. Please help us help these aging out children.