

Sonoma County's Quality Parenting Initiative: "Our Kids, Our Community. Together We're Better"

DARLA NICHOLSON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All children deserve to be parented in a loving and supportive environment. For children who are unable to live with their families, the responsibility of parenting becomes that of child welfare. In anticipation of changes in upcoming state regulations, Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children's Services has implemented fundamental principles of Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI). In line with the QPI philosophy, Sonoma County has implemented other systemic shifts in order to provide safety, permanence, and well-being to children through an increase of foster care payments,

expanded parental education to care providers, increased community awareness of ways to support local foster children's needs, and more. A QPI Committee is composed of various individuals involved in the foster child's development. Through collaboration, communication, and commitment, the QPI Committee has minimized challenges and celebrated successes. The successes are rhetorical in nature and a quantitative value cannot be ascribed; yet, this does not diminish the probability that children will have a positive experience during out-of-home placement.

**Darla Nicholson, Human Services Supervisor,
San Mateo County Children & Family Services**

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Background

Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is a strengths-based approach to parenting children in foster care involving a refocus of parenting so all children in the child welfare system are provided with a loving, committed, and caring environment. It is important to note that QPI is a philosophy and not a program. There is recognition that certain steps must be taken for the practical application of QPI ideations. QPI's initial efforts are focused on re-branding foster care by changing expectations and supports for foster parents, other caregivers, and biological parents. Florida¹ has implemented QPI and has noted that the key elements of the QPI process are to:

- define the expectations of caregivers,;
- clearly articulate the expectations, and then
- align the system so that those goals can become a reality.

In an effort to promote normalcy for children in foster care, the California Department of Social Services has invited counties to review the QPI approach and identify strategies that will recruit and retain high quality foster caregivers.² The Youth Law Center of San Francisco and Stuart Foundation sponsored an idea that children in foster care need to be parented in family-based homes, rather than group living. Sonoma, Santa Clara, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Fresno, Ventura, Humboldt and Kern Counties were selected to pilot the Quality Parenting Initiative in California.

¹ <http://www.qpiflorida.org/pages/About/About.html>

² All County Information Notice No. I-16-11 (2011)

Sonoma County Implementation

As of 2010, Sonoma County began implementing QPI in an effort to strengthen foster parenting by refocusing on excellent parenting for all children in the child welfare system. Family-based care is the cornerstone of Continuum of Care Reform (CCR)³. CCR is a statewide initiative to move children from group home care to family-based care. All counties must implement CCR by January 1, 2017. QPI is a natural enhancement to CCR in increasing recruitment, retention, and support for relative caregivers and licensed foster parents, which will result in more foster children residing in stable, loving homes, and improving outcomes for their safety, permanency, and wellness. The governing body of QPI in Sonoma is the Quality Parent Initiative Committee. The committee is chaired by Jennifer Rodriguez of the Youth Law Center of San Francisco. The committee members include social workers, supervisors, managers, foster parents, Foster Family Agency representatives, and community college trainers.

Goals

Sonoma had a number of goals it wanted to use QPI to help meet. First the county wanted to improve the retention rate of local foster family homes in an effort to keep children close to the areas of which they are most familiar. Beginning 2014, there were 80 licensed foster care homes in Sonoma County, however, by December the number was reduced to 73. Next, the county desired to reduce the high

³ http://www.cdss.ca.gov/cdssweb/entres/pdf/CCR_LegislativeReport.pdf

rate of children placed into group homes after being taken into custody. While the rate for out-of-county placement is 20.5 %, given there are only 73 in-county licensed foster homes, most of the 670 children who are placed locally, stay at the Valley of the Moon Children's Center, a group home facility. Lastly, Sonoma County wanted to improve the quality of parenting for children while in out-of-home care, regardless of group home or family home setting. The committee acknowledged that to meet these goals some specific steps needed to occur: 1) provide the same training to all parties who make decisions for the children, 2) clarify the language/jargon use by county staff, and 3) really clarify to youth what the county's role is and what the county can do for them and what it cannot do.

Application

Parenting is what counties have to offer to the children in absentia of their own parents who have failed to meet community standards. Steps taken toward applying the QPI philosophy include:

- Cross training in positive parenting styles for social workers (SW), foster caregivers, Court Appointed Special Advocates for children (CASAs), child lawyers, and other adults with whom the child spends significant time is essential.
- Increasing the payments to foster caregivers is a tangible way to demonstrate the county's commitment to the importance of quality care.
- Finding and retaining quality foster parents is important to the rebranding of foster parenting.
- Establishing guidelines and expectations is essential.

QPI practice should be implemented at the first step of out-of-home placement. As early as at the detention hearing, QPI can start with the SW immediately getting the details of the child's likes and needs from the parent to share with the foster parent. This critical information should include, but is not limited to, the child's favorite toys, games,

books, and TV shows. It also includes the child's habits, such as, sleep patterns, likes and dislikes of food, techniques to calm if upset, homework habits, and health-related information. The unique needs of the child should be communicated amongst those who have been, are or will potentially be providing care. Direct communication between foster parents and the biological parent is encouraged in order for social workers, foster care provider, and biological parents to have the same perspective. Sonoma County has decided that all trainings will be offered to all and encourages co-attendance of vested parties. This ensures all interested parties not only receive the same content, but also receive it in the same format.

By supplementing state/federal payments with local funds scaled to the children's ages and placement type foster parents are empowered to be able to provide more for the entire household, including the child, and will help retain local foster homes.

Re-branding is more than either re-titling or restructuring of the foster care system. Public awareness beyond those directly involved in foster care is critical for QPI success. A public awareness campaign to encourage residents to shop locally (advertisements on buses, stickers in business windows, etc.), called Go Local, is now a familiar logo throughout Sonoma County. The QPI committee is looking to institute a similar awareness campaign called Foster Local. It may be as simple as pre-buying a cup of coffee in a local store that has agreed to set up an account for identified foster parents or donating services such as haircuts or carwashes in a similar fashion. The purpose of the campaign will be multi-level. First it will highlight the need for more local foster family homes. Second, the foster parent will receive public support as well as donated items. The community will have a chance to support existing foster families by either being a business that identifies as a Foster Local supporter or a community member that wishes to donate. QPI Committee meets quarterly to strengthen relationships, discuss issues, and identify solutions.

Challenges

Challenges presented in various ways, include but are not limited to:

- **Shifting focus**—In order for QPI to be successful, all parties had to shift their focus to the child being the center of all decisions and interactions. Previous to QPI there was no emphasis that the child is the center and most important person in the relationship. Prior to QPI there was little to no encouragement for contact between a biological parent and the foster caregiver. With QPI guidance there is a promotion of direct communication between caregivers (past, current, and future) and social workers. It has generally been accepted that the child will live under the parenting style of the household in which the child is living. QPI, with education and training, seeks to have the current caregiver provide an environment that best suits the child. This may mean that foster parent needs to have contact and speak directly with the person who has provided care for the child in the past to learn that child's particular likes, dislikes, and effective behavior modification techniques (time outs, reward system, etc.). Conversely, the next home the child moves to, possibly another foster care giver or a biological parent, would need to know what that child likes, dislikes, and his or her normal routine. If the child is returning to a former home, it would be useful for the new care provider to know if the child moved on to the next developmental stage or if the child responds positively or negatively to new techniques employed by a the former caregiver. There are many studies that confirm that children with basic routines do better with peer relations and schoolwork, even if the child is raised in a shared custody situation.⁴ According to Joyce Hammerich, a foster care provider for over 13 years, getting to know the

biological parents and having a warm transfer of custody has been beneficial to many of the kids she has provided care for. She stated that initially she was reluctant to meet the parents of a child for whom custody was lost due to her own bias that the parents did not care for their children. This was something Mrs. Hammerich could not identify. She found it challenging to allow the parent in her home; however, she realized it was not her discomfort that what was important, it was the child seeing his or her parent in a comfortable and secure environment. Additionally, modeling mature behavior and having the child see positive and united interactions between current and former caregivers gave the child much needed skills and how to get along with others.

- **Adhering to guidelines**—The QPI Committee established guidelines that all interested parties would abide. One such policy is all phone calls should be returned within 2 days. Foster care providers and social workers express a frustration with calls not being returned timely. Both accused the other of not being committed to QPI. Over the course of the quarterly meetings it became clear that the important aspect is not whether a phone call was returned within a set timeframe, but was the information regarding the child's need that needed to be communicated in a timely manner.
- **Fiscal implications**—With implementing QPI, there is an increase in net count cost with: (1) supplementing the foster care payment and (2) the county staff time that is used to attend trainings. These costs are covered by Sonoma County; Youth Law Center has contributed zero actual dollars. Jennifer Rodriguez's time is charged to the county's training budget. Thus far, Sonoma County has not seen the need to do a cost analysis, as QPI is seen as a change in business process not as a separate program or additional workload. This may change in the future if a QPI coordinator position is added to coordinate training

⁴ Bauserman, R (2002). "Child adjustment in joint-custody versus sole-custody arrangements: A meta-analytic review". *Journal of Family Psychology* 16 (1): 91-102.

efforts, mileage reimbursement payments, compensation to youth advisors, and recruitment of new family foster homes.

Successes

All members of the QPI Committee are in agreement that many of the challenges in the early stages have now been overcome and the work has shifted from implementation to maintenance.

The importance of communication is no longer viewed in terms of quantity, but quality. The practice of warm transfers when moving a child's placement has made the transition easier on all parties including the original provider, the new provider, the child and the social worker. The information garnered and shared even before the child enters the new home has resulted in not re-traumatizing the child. As foster parents and biological parents get to know each other, children do not need to feel anxious or disloyal when discussing time spent apart from either parent. As foster parents develop their own relationships with the biological parent, they can invite that parent into their home and supervise visitation in a more natural and comfortable setting. Joyce Hammerich shared that she has, on several occasions, provided mentorship to the struggling parent and the children and to the biological parents were able to have more visits under her supervision. This is similar to how most family courts and modern parenting experts encourage parents who either no longer or ever lived together to interact.

Foster parents through the QPI trainings and committee meetings have had the opportunity to develop relationships with other foster parents. This important connection has become a valuable resource when the foster parent is looking for babysitting from other foster parents that have had training and experience with foster children. This can be a supplement to respite care services already in place.

Recommendations for San Mateo County

San Mateo County Children and Family Services can benefit from the steps already taken by Sonoma County with regards to the Quality Parenting Initiative. It should be reiterated at this point that QPI is not a program, but a philosophy put into practice. Some of the steps that Sonoma County has taken with regards to training and restructuring its payment system, gives the appearance that QPI is a program that should be administered and monitored. There is no data to validate the effectiveness of QPI. Quality Parenting Initiative is more than a program. QPI is an enhancement and falls in line with CCR. No one wants one bad placement experience to set back a child's development, possibly further than the situation the child was originally removed from for protection. The QPI mission is to have effective, loving parenting.

Jennifer Rodriguez of Youth Law Center states, "QPI is a journey, not a destination."

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