

Families Across Michigan

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"Let us put our minds together and see what kind of future we can make for our children."
-- Chief Sitting Bull

Families Across Michigan
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Confessions from a Parenting Class

(MARE Program Director Kirsta Grapentine recently completed an eight-week parenting class. Memoirs and lessons will appear as a series in *FAM*)

I recently enrolled in a parenting class that focused on early childhood. My purpose for doing so was three-fold: to gather more information on parenting for use during pre-adopt training of prospective adoptive families; to use the information to write parenting articles for MARE's *FAM* newsletter; and last but not least, to build my skills as a parent of two young children.

The classes were offered through a local center that was affiliated with the Council on Child Abuse and Neglect. The Center provides a myriad of services to the community including parenting classes, supervised visits for non-custodial parents, support groups and childcare. Excited about the opportunity to learn skills that would make me an even better parent, my first lesson learned was a hard one: nobody voluntarily takes parenting classes. When I shared with friends that I had enrolled in a parenting class they would pause and ask if I was having problems, or if Child Protective Services had recently paid me a visit. Perhaps if the classes had been held at the local Y or in a church, the stigma of taking a parenting class would have been less.

I realize that there is no such thing as the Perfect Parent. There are some parents who are better able to understand and meet their children's needs than others. I also realize that being a parent is the hardest but most important job in the world. The less-prepared we are and the fewer resources we have, the greater the challenge of parenting seems. But I began to question whether parenting classes were worth the hassle of having to face the knowing glances of those who did not see their merit. This set the stage for my second lesson: check your attitude at the door.

I admit that I was ready to drop out of parenting class before the first one ever began. As I walked toward the Center on the first day of class, a disheveled man rode up on a bicycle and headed toward the same building. In the pit of my stomach I knew that he would be in my class and that I would open the door to find more people inside that were not like me. And I did. Although for confidentiality reasons I cannot disclose specific information about the other individuals in the class, I can say that we were the only family that attended class voluntarily. For some reason I figured that made me better. But by the end of the first class, I realized that I had more in common with these families than not. We all faced similar challenges, and wanted to provide our children with more child-centered and sensitive parenting techniques than our parents had provided us. Although I can't speak for all of us at the table that day, I can say that I, for one, did not plan on coming back for the next class. But on that first day the teacher offered us each a gift that no one could refuse. The gift was that by the end of the course, we would all have a repertoire of parenting techniques that would work, and that would allow us to discipline our children without resorting to corporal punishment. Every single one of us was back for the second class. And by the end of the course, I had a new type of admiration for my fellow classmates, especially the man who rode to class on a bicycle.

Next issue: *What type of a parent are you? Lessons in parenting styles.*

MARE is Expanding!

Most adoption exchanges around the country are the “center of activity” – that is, families who are interested in waiting children in those states contact their state exchange for more information about children, rather than contacting the child’s worker directly. According to other state exchanges, this allows for children’s workers to focus their energies on finding the most appropriate family for a child, rather than fielding dozens of phone calls from families who may not be appropriate, or are not approved for adoption. It also allows the exchanges to intercept families who are not currently studied and approved, and provide them with more information about adoption, including referring them to agencies that will help them with an adoption assessment.

In February, 2001, MARE initiated a “pilot project” to assess the viability of the MARE office intaking all inquiries about waiting children on the Exchange. The project was tested using the MARE website (www.mare.org), and included children listed with five specific agencies:

- Lutheran Adoption Service, Detroit area
- Orchards Children’s Services
- Whaley Children’s Center
- Wayne County FIA
- Saginaw County FIA

These five agencies were chosen because of the number of children they serve (approximately one-quarter of children listed on the Exchange).

When a family is interested in a child listed with one of these five agencies, they complete an online form based on whether they have an approved homestudy/Family Assessment, they are in the process of having a homestudy/Family Assessment completed, or they do not have a homestudy/Family Assessment. This online form is emailed to the MARE office, where the information is then disseminated to the child’s worker, the family’s worker, and the family. Both the family’s worker and children’s worker are asked to make contact with each other to gather more information and explore the possibility of a placement. MARE then follows up with all parties three weeks after the initial inquiry.

The pilot project allowed MARE to gather data in certain areas, including how timely workers contact each other; whether families are appropriate; and whether children are still available for adoption.

The process has empowered families and their workers to pursue adoption of waiting children. The fact that 21 placements have occurred to date – as well as numerous placements between inquiring families and children who were not a part of the pilot project — shows this has the potential to help children move into permanent families.

While we are interested in moving forward with this process, we must be certain it is what is best – for Michigan’s waiting children.

As of December 1, 2003 – almost three years after the pilot project was initiated – 2,347 families have inquired about children listed on MARE’s website. Of those families, 53% (1,251) indicate they have an approved homestudy/Family Assessment, and 9% (204) indicate they are

in the process of having a homestudy/Family Assessment completed. The remaining 38% (892) are Michigan families that indicate they do not have a homestudy/Family Assessment. These families were provided with more information about adoption, including referral to an agency that could complete an assessment.

Of the 1,455 families that inquired that either have a homestudy, or are in the process of completing an assessment, 64% (936) are from Michigan, and 36% are from outside of Michigan.

These families inquired about 467 specific children, for a total of 2,566 inquiries (some families inquired about multiple children; a few families inquired repeatedly about the same child).

Where Do We Go From Here?

Starting on January 15, 2004, all inquiries about children listed on MARE’s website will come through the MARE office. The MARE book, however, will remain in its current form – listing the worker’s name, agency and phone number for each child.

Families – or family’s workers – will continue to complete an online form to inquire about a specific child or children. MARE will continue to follow up on these inquiries three weeks after the inquiry is

initially received. MARE will also begin a second round of follow-up letters, six weeks after the initial inquiry is received (and three weeks after the first follow-up letter is sent). This will allow us to continue gathering information about the status of the child, the family, and the possibility for placement, as well as give us the opportunity to intercede in any problematic areas.

What Does All This Mean?

Hopefully, implementing this process will have several positive outcomes:

1. Children's workers will have

more time to investigate studied and approved families, rather than spending time fielding phone calls from families for whom they have no information.

2. Families will feel empowered to take control of their adoption process, by inquiring about children they are interested in – instead of waiting for their workers to do that for them.

3. Family's workers will be able to let their families have more control of their adoption process, and will also have more time to develop strong rela-

tionships with the children's workers.

If this process goes smoothly (and we don't doubt there will be bumps, perhaps evens potholes, along the road!), the next phase of this project will be to change over the MARE book itself. While we are interested in moving forward with this process, we must be certain it is what is best – for Michigan's waiting children.

If you have any questions, or need further clarification about this process, please do not hesitate to contact Nancy Berger at (517) 783-6273 or email her at nberger@mare.org



The End of an Era

This announcement was posted by the Michigan Foster and Adoption Parent Association on December 3, 2003.

The Michigan Foster & Adoptive Parent Association is saddened to inform you of the need to temporarily suspend services. The suspension of services will commence December 15, 2003. The need to make this decision is made as a result of the end of MFAPA's contract with the Family Independence Agency. Therefore MFAPA will not be able to provide trainers and materials for pre-service PRIDE and specialized trainings. There will be no reimbursement for mentoring. All technical assistance to support groups will end. Communication through the Hot-Sheet, newsletter, website and resource and referral will be severely limited. MFAPA regrets any inconvenience this lack of funding may cause you or your agency.

I will continue this Hot Sheet as long as possible but please use the email address of lescher@wmis.net only. Please do not use gilbertc@mfapa.org.



I'm Still Waiting!

Twelve-year-old Jeffrey is a friendly child who enjoys bike riding, skating and sports. He also likes "hands-on" projects such as puzzles and building things with wood, plastic and metal. Family outings such as going to the movies or to the park are also important to him.

Jeffrey is an easy-going child but can display oppositional behaviors. He does not always respond well to redirection and may "shut down" and have difficulty expressing himself when upset. Jeffrey receives additional educational services at school and has exhibited some aggressive behaviors in the past.

Jeffrey has had many placements while in care and is currently in a residential facility. He needs a patient and loving family who can make a firm commitment and help him reach his full potential. He may also need to maintain contact with some birth family members.

For more information, please contact Kathleen McCracken of Christ Child House at (313) 587-5304.



The MARE staff wishes you and yours a happy holiday and a joyous new year. During this season of family, let us not forget Michigan's waiting children.

Our offices will be closed December 24th and 25, and January 1st, in celebration of the holidays. Our staff will be reduced during the two-week holiday period.



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