



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

What is the **Quality Parenting Initiative?**

Imagine a child welfare system organized around a single principle: Every child deserves excellent parenting, every day. How would that system look different from the one we have today? Would the system return children to their parents, or place them with relatives faster? Would reunifications or placements be more stable, offering children greater security and reducing the [trauma of separation](#)? Would success be measured in terms of the ability to maintain and build strong relationships for children? These are the questions that the Youth Law Center's [Quality Parenting Initiative](#) (QPI) asks jurisdictions to consider and address.

The approach

QPI is a process to **strengthen foster care and improve permanency and well-being for children** by shifting systems away from a bureaucracy and toward an approach based on relationships. This includes focusing on relative caregivers and foster families' ability to [partner with birth parents](#), strengthen other meaningful relationships for children, and ensure children have access to the experiences that can help them heal, grow, and flourish. Child development and trauma research overwhelmingly indicates that children need consistent and effective parenting to thrive.¹ QPI's aim is to ensure that all children placed in out-of-home care, whether with a relative, fictive kin, or licensed family, receive high-quality parenting that meets their emotional, developmental, cognitive, and social needs. QPI also believes that all stakeholders within jurisdictions can and must work together to



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achieve this goal through reshaping culture, practice, and policy to encourage active and meaningful communication and partnership among birth families, relative caregivers, foster families, youth, and the child welfare system.

Since its inception in Florida in 2008, QPI has expanded to more than 75 jurisdictions in California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin.

For more information on the principles of QPI, see our Q&A with Jennifer Rodriguez and Carole Shauffer of the Youth Law Center: [How does the Quality Parenting Initiative support healthy childhoods and co-parenting with birth families?](#)

Core values

QPI is laser-focused on relationships. “Kids need relationships to thrive and recover from trauma,” says Carole Shauffer, Youth Law Center’s senior director of strategic initiatives.² This need for relationships cannot be put on hold while a family recovers from crisis or until an adoption can be finalized. Children need excellent parenting every single day — through committed, developmentally informed relationships with caring adults.

QPI also asserts that child welfare systems will not attract caregivers who can provide this kind of excellent parenting unless those caregivers are treated as key members of the team and supported in having strong relationships with the children in their care. That includes supporting relationships between birth and foster families.

According to the QPI approach, each jurisdiction must determine for itself how to put these core values into practice. Each community that engages in QPI begins by defining “excellent parenting” and then identifies the policy and practice changes necessary to align with that definition.

The QPI approach is a “bottom-up” process that requires support from leadership. Leaders acknowledge the need for change and commit to following through, but the ideas and direction for change come from those who are [most involved in and affected by the system](#): birth parents, youth, kin, foster parents, and caseworkers.

Essential elements

QPI is best described as a systems change process rather than a set of predetermined strategies. The key elements of QPI are:

1. **Defining the expectations of caregivers and the child welfare system around excellent parenting.** QPI jurisdictions first convene a broad group of stakeholders to define what excellent foster and kinship care means for their community. Stakeholders include birth parents, youth, kin, foster parents, and caseworkers, as well as other partners in the system, such as attorneys and court personnel, along with representatives from schools, health departments, faith communities, and other sectors. Together, this group develops expectations for providing and supporting excellent parenting for children in out-of-home placements.

Children need relationships. There is nothing we have more research about than that. We need to rebuild child welfare, almost every single aspect, to develop excellent relationships.

— JENNIFER RODRIGUEZ,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, YOUTH LAW CENTER

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2. **Clearly communicating expectations to staff, caregivers, and other stakeholders.**

Each jurisdiction develops a “brand statement” describing the agency’s expectations for kinship and foster caregivers, as well as what caregivers can expect in return from the child protection agency. This brand statement provides a roadmap for change and forms the basis for new recruitment and training strategies to attract quality caregivers. It lets caregivers know that the agency considers them to be valued and equal members of the team. Caregivers are expected to develop relationships with the child in their care while teaming with caseworkers and birth family members to support timely reunification, whenever possible. “You can’t tolerate people who are providing inadequate parenting simply because you’re recruiting for beds,” Shauffer says. “Recruiting for beds undermines relationships.” A brand statement is not just a recruiting and training tool. It sets the standard for how people treat one another, and it is a reminder of the agency’s new goal toward excellence. “The brand has to be lived internally before an agency can sell it to outsiders,” Shauffer says.³

3. **Aligning system policy and practice with those expectations.** Once the brand is defined, stakeholders work together to identify barriers and solutions to improve their community’s foster care system. Foster parents, youth, kin, birth parents, caseworkers, youth social workers, attorneys, judges, and other community partners all work together to identify the changes

necessary to meet the goals of system improvement. Their innovations are based on their own experience and lessons learned through research on child development. Leadership commits to supporting QPI principles and listening to the voices from the field. While recognizing that change eventually may be needed in almost every aspect of the system, QPI encourages jurisdictions to begin with three relatively simple changes:

- Ensuring relationships are prioritized.
- Making sure that enough high-quality relative and non-relative foster parents are available to care for children.
- Providing caregivers the information, tools, and resources they need to provide excellent care, including an infrastructure to create strong partnerships with birth families.

The Youth Law Center coaches and supports QPI jurisdictions throughout this process, and provides access to a range of implementation and advocacy resources. Center staff may provide strategic consulting, facilitation for early meetings, and organizing support while jurisdictions develop expectations, identify barriers, and create an initial implementation plan. Once in the implementation phase, local stakeholders lead their own process. Center staff may provide ongoing consultation and technical assistance but have a primary focus on building a network of stakeholders within the community who work together to redesign child welfare to a relationship-based system.

Excellent foster parents reduce length of stay because they’re working with the birth parents on reunification, and they reduce re-entry because they provide birth parents with an expanded natural network within their own community.

— CAROLE SHAUFFER,
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, YOUTH LAW CENTER

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Data and evaluation

Although many QPI jurisdictions have experienced positive outcomes, the Youth Law Center is cautious about the data gathered to date. Given that there is not currently a method to collect systemwide data on quality of care — and the fact that jurisdictions implementing QPI often are employing other systems change initiatives at the same time — it is difficult to ascribe changes to a single QPI approach.

However, self-reported assessments in participating sites — as well as a Florida Department of Children and Families survey — found that foster parents felt supported and encouraged both in [normalcy](#)⁴ and in developing birth parent–foster parent relationships. The University of Maryland currently is conducting a systematic evaluation of QPI⁵ and the results will be released in 2020. The study is expected to help the field better understand the impacts of QPI on children and families involved with the foster care system. Preliminary findings show:

- QPI can improve relationships between birth parents, foster parents (or kinship caregivers), and agency staff.
- QPI implementation is most successful when all stakeholders have a solid understanding of QPI principles and play a role in QPI activities.

In practice and policy

The Youth Law Center recognizes that the work of QPI — changing a child welfare system’s primary focus from simply mitigating risk to providing excellent parenting — is never really finished. “Successful sites feel that they are part of a movement and know that they are always going to have to be part of the movement,” Shauffer says.⁶ At its core, QPI is about culture change, which can be hard to describe because it looks a little different in every jurisdiction.

Several jurisdictions, including Louisiana and Milwaukee, have implemented a practice change requiring what they call “comfort calls” to open a line of **communication between the birth and foster family** immediately upon a child’s placement into a new foster home. The caseworker calls the birth parent from the foster home to provide reassurance that the child is safe, and to share some information about the foster caregiver’s household. The caseworker also gives the birth parent an opportunity to tell the foster parent anything that might help ease the child’s first few days in care — anything from sleep routines to fears to food allergies.

In other jurisdictions, birth and foster families meet in person soon after placement to develop **formal co-parenting agreements** about how they will work together, communicate, and share in the care of the children. Providing opportunities for birth parents



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to participate in the care of their children while in placement (including attendance at medical or therapy appointments and school meetings, as well as in less formal settings) may help birth parents stay connected, reduce stress to the child, and support more timely and lasting reunification. Providing an avenue for birth parents to share critical information about the child also serves to improve the foster family's ability to care for the child and meet the child's unique needs. In addition, when children know both sets of parents are working together, any implicit or explicit pressure to pick a side is eliminated and the child can form a positive relationship with both families. In some cases, foster parents host visitation in their homes and provide informal coaching and mentorship to birth parents. **Family Support Network in Northwest Florida** has a specialized team dedicated to working intensively with foster and birth families for two to three weeks immediately after placement in order to support a healthy relationship.

In **California**, QPI resulted in a [change in policy regarding alternate care](#). Previously, if foster parents needed to be away for longer than a day, they often were required to use a formalized respite care program. This could result in, for example, a family's biological children going to stay with a familiar relative while siblings in foster care were sent to a stranger family or shelter, a stressful situation for all involved. Under the new policy, foster parents are trusted to select the best caregiver for all of their children when they have to be apart.

In **Louisiana**, faith community partners in the QPI effort had been providing "open tables for youth" —

inviting members of their communities to come to a dinner party to get to know and mentor a youth who is in (or recently emancipated from) foster care. Once these partners became aware of the vision of supporting birth families, the concept was extended to create **informal networks of encouragement for families that were at risk of being involved with child welfare or recently had reunified**. Louisiana also implemented an employee performance and supervisory [performance review tool](#) that measures how staff puts the QPI brand into practice.

Implementation and adaptation support

QPI sites share their documents, experiences, and lessons learned with the field, which has helped create an extensive [repository of QPI supports](#) that provide detailed guidance on QPI implementation. The repository also includes examples of products and tools for consideration or adaptation, such as: co-parenting; visitation; court participation; information sharing; mentoring; partnership plan and communication; investigations; normalcy; recruitment and support; and transitions. Specific resources include:

- Detailed examples of QPI policies and procedures across the nation, including each site's actual documents, guides, memos, and agreements, such as:
 - » QPI's [email template](#) to ensure that caregivers receive timely notification and invitations to participate in Family Court hearings for the children in their care.

It's been amazing. Anything and everything I ever wanted as a biological parent and now as a parent mentor, everything I ever wanted in a system change, was wrapped up in QPI.

— TIFFANY CAROL,
BIRTH PARENT IN LOUISIANA

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- » California's [partnership plan](#) that lays out expectations for how caregivers and child welfare staff should work together.
- » A sample "[Meet Our Family](#)" form to help foster caregivers inform birth families about their households at icebreaker meetings.
- Real-time, online training modules that allow individuals implementing QPI to instantly connect and share experiences, insights, and

lessons learned, including mentoring and coaching by experienced foster parents and training professionals.

- [Conference videos and documents](#) to ensure everyone has access to pertinent information and best practices.
- Access to each jurisdiction's local QPI page (see, for example, [Florida's QPI webpage](#)).

1 Bruskas, D. (2008). Children in foster care: A vulnerable population at risk. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 21(2), pp. 70-77.

Zeanah, C C., Shauffer, H. & Dozier, M. (2011). Foster care for young children: Why it must be developmentally informed. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 50(12), 1199-1201.

Rafeedie, J., Hudson, S. M., Deavenport-Saman, A., Rao, S., Rogers, K., & Roberts, S. (2019). Decision-making in foster care: A child-centered approach to reducing toxic stress in foster children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 96, 10-16.

2 Interview with Carole Shauffer and Jennifer Rodriguez, Feb. 20, 2019.

3 Interview, Feb. 20, 2019.

4 Normalcy means providing the opportunity for children and youth in out-of-home care to participate in the same age and developmentally appropriate activities and experiences as their peers who are not in foster care.

5 A multi-stage evaluation of QPI conducted by the University of Maryland is in process, with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

6 Interview with Carole Shauffer and Jennifer Rodriguez, March 4, 2019.

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