

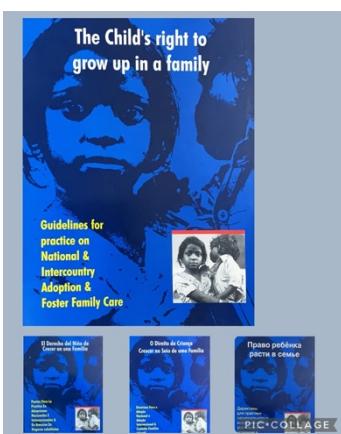
Recruiting Foster Families – Tips to Move Ahead!

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Recruiting foster families in India for children in institutions or without parental care is mandated by law. However, foster care services have reached only a minuscule number of children, mostly through extended families (known more familiarly as kinship care) as foster care as a practice is yet to gain momentum in the country. The Central Adoption Resource Authority's (CARA) through its Model Guidelines on Foster Care² of April 2024 has now outlined procedures to promote this family-based service for children especially children in institutions whose numbers are rising and now stands at almost 2.6 lakh children living in 7,000 child care institutions (CCIs)³.

Right to Foster Care as service for children in institutions

Children are in institutions primarily due to economic or social challenges faced by their birth families. They continue to spend most of their childhood in institutions, missing out on family life and facing problems assimilating into the community. To promote family based care for children, the Model Guidelines on Foster Care has categorised children as "children with no visitations" and "children having unfit guardians". Foster care would most certainly offer an excellent option for all these children who are not legally free for adoption or are legally free for adoption but have no families willing to adopt them. Needless to emphasise that Foster Care as an option for children in institutions is only a "next best" alternative. This must be resorted to only after all efforts have been made to strengthen and support birth families so that children can be restored to their own families or extended families with financial support if required. This would ensure that birth ties are not broken and children grow up in a familiar family and cultural milieu. When such efforts are exhausted, after a stipulated period as mandated by law or as required, the need is to focus on foster care placement. Proactively recruiting foster families then becomes imperative to meet the specific needs of individual children languishing in institutions.



In this context, social workers would do well to recognize that the right of children to grow up in a family environment are endorsed by several instruments. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UN CRC) which India ratified in 1991, has recognized the exceptional vulnerability of children and the need to create an environment that is conducive to children's healthy growth and development. In several articles it strongly endorses the promotion of family based care, including Foster Care. The Guidelines for Practice on National and Inter-country Adoption and Foster Family Care (1997)⁴ distributed worldwide has highlighted procedures to govern the practice of foster care and adoption to support the increasing number of professionals engaged in

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² <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/MODEL%20FOSTERCARE%20GUIDELINES%2C%202024%20%281%29.pdf>

³ <https://www.epw.in/journal/2022/41/letters/orphaned-children-and-childcare>

institutions.html#:~:text=There%20are%20almost%202.6%20lakh,abandoned%2C%20the%20government%20steps%20in.

⁴ <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/5620507>

implementing these services. In keeping with the UN CRC and acknowledging best practices of some non-governmental organizations in India⁵ our Juvenile Justice Act of 1986 and its subsequent amendments in 2000, 2006, 2009, 2015 and 2021 and our National Policy for Children 2013 has also strongly validated family based care for children in need of alternate care.

Identifying Children in Need of Foster Care

Foster Care services commences with the identification of children needing foster care. District Child Protection Services can start with SARA's or district's database or that of local CCIs and by interaction with the children, reviewing their admission records, noting who admitted them, was it through the CWC or family or another NGO, and frequency of family contact. Evaluating academic performance and conducting home inquiries and compiling social investigation, individual care plans and child study reports aids in decision making on the suitability for foster care placement while following all legal requirements. Creating a comprehensive database of children needing foster care by registering their data in CARINGS⁶ as mentioned earlier is thus a starting point.

Paucity of Foster Care Families

The next step is finding and recruiting foster families. This can be challenging, given that the biggest barrier is that culturally India does not have a concept of foster care by unrelated families though we have many mythological stories. Further, social changes, breakup of joint families, increasing number of women joining the workforce and families aspiring for higher living standards limits those willing to open their homes to a child in need. A handful of agencies in India did foray into promoting foster care even in the 1980s but the reach even today remains limited.

Model Guidelines for Foster Care, 2016

In 2016, the Ministry of Women and Child Development with the support of child protection experts in the country brought out the Model Guidelines for Foster Care, 2016 which is available on CARA's website. This compendium touches upon all aspects of the Foster Care Program including Group Foster Care for children in need of alternate care. The contents include identification of children requiring foster care and children who are not legally free for adoption. It elucidates on the rights of children, foster families and birth families, the need for individual care plan and preparation of child study report. The Guidelines explain the criteria for assessment and selection of foster families and whether biological children and extended family members particularly those in the joint family living are consenting to taking in a child in foster care, the procedures prior to placement, the matching process, counselling for all parties involved, the role of DCPUs, CWCs and the Protection Officer – Non-institutional care. It also contains IEC content and several annexures with formats to run a Foster Care program including a monitoring tool and explanatory notes for implementation.

Recruiting Foster Care Families – Experiential Learnings

To promote a successful recruiting drive of foster families in India, efforts need to be strategic, well planned with actionable steps. Detailed below are some ideas for consideration based on experiences of the De-institutionalising Project (DIP) of the Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare (KSCCW) which ran from 1994 to 2007 and focused on promoting alternative care for children in institutions. The project at one time had five professional social workers on board and was supported by TdH,

⁵ Family Service Centre, Mumbai; YCDA, Odisha; CHES Chennai; Bal Sanghopan Scheme, Maharashtra; Karnataka Govt.'s Foster Care Scheme of 1997 among some others

⁶ CARA Office Memorandum, E 96181/CARA-EA043/9/2021, dated 15-04-2024

Germany and later CRY. The suggestions made are also on the experiences of social workers and managers of programs on foster care in India, USA, Sweden, Thailand and the Philippines many of whom the author interacted with as Secretary of the Working Group (1997) that drafted The Child's Right to Family- Guidelines for Practice on National and Inter-country Adoption and Foster Family Care in 1997. Also included are research reports, experiences and media outputs on foster care sourced from the internet such as the article "Strategies for Recruiting Foster Families in Spain" ⁷ that highlights the challenges faced in Spain that are relevant to India and makes interesting reading. Reviewing these contents, the author remains optimistic that prime movers like BOSCO, IAPA, YCDA or Centre for Excellence in Alternative Care India will further strengthen their foster parent recruiting programme and others in the voluntary sector across the length and breadth of India will initiate a recruiting programme in partnership with the SARA and District Administration to suit their specific locale, culture and need.

1. Recognizing what motivates families to foster children
2. Understanding the decision making process within prospective foster families
3. Undertaking media campaigns with clear strategies
4. Collaborating with all relevant stakeholders
5. Approving families and assisting with registering in CARA's designated portal CARINGS while adhering to the legal framework
6. Offering training, support programs and implementing a system of regular monitoring and supervision
7. Possible Challenges in running a Foster Care Program
8. Generating a Foster Care Database of experienced and potential foster families and making recommendations to CARA and State Governments

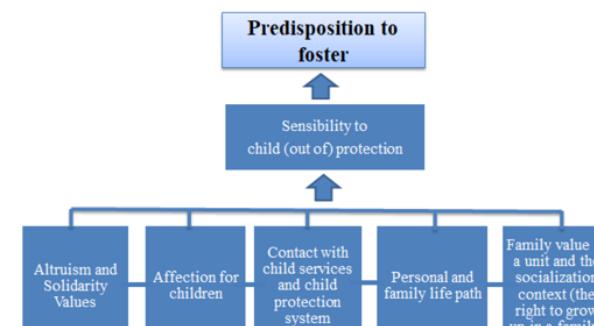
By following these steps, the process of recruiting foster families in India can become more effective, ensuring that more children in need find loving and supportive homes through foster care.

1. Recognizing what motivates families to foster children⁸

Here are some key joys and rewards as shared by foster families on what motivates fostering children in difficult circumstance.

1. Foster families find it profoundly rewarding to offer a stable environment to children who have faced trauma and in helping them build resilience and self-confidence, empowering them with life skills and a sense of self-worth

How Do People Become Foster Carers in Portugal? The Process of Building the Motivation



⁷https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288170922_Strategies_to_attract_foster_families#:~:text=The%20most%20successful%20recruitment%20interventions,about%20what%20this%20decision%20entail

⁸ i. Motivation for Foster Care -A research study in the USA - http://www.outcome-network.org/paper/306:motivation_for_foster_care

ii. Recruiting foster families for teenagers in Italy: Motivational elements, socio-demographic characteristics and availability factors- <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2024-46439-001>

iii. FosterUSkids -Everything you need to know about how to be a foster parent

<https://www.fosteruskids.org/blog/everything-you-need-to-know-about-how-to-be-a-foster-parent>

2. Foster families experience the deep satisfaction of transforming lives (sharing in a child's milestones and everyday victories, like a genuine smile or newfound confidence), nurturing talent, witnessing positive changes such as improved behaviour, academic success, and emotional stability.



3. Foster families build deep, meaningful bonds receiving mutual affection and creating happy memories, such as family vacations and celebrations, knowing these experiences will be cherished and leave a lasting impact to form lifelong connections, thus expanding their family with foster children.

4. Fostering enhances empathy, understanding, teaches inclusivity and offers personal growth by exposing families including their own children to diverse backgrounds and life stories. This leaves a positive legacy that influences future generations.

5. Foster families feel a sense of pride in contributing positively to society, set an example of kindness and generosity, and experience strengthened family bonds and unity.

6. Building connections with other foster families and support networks further enriches their social life. Their inspirational stories and testimonials serve as powerful encouragement for others to consider fostering.

Highlighting these joys in the media, including social media campaigns can effectively promote the positive aspects of fostering, encouraging more families to open their hearts and homes to children in need⁹.

2. Understanding the decision making process within prospective foster families¹⁰

Here's a detailed breakdown of how decision-making typically unfolds in families considering fostering a child.

1. Families become initially aware of the need for foster care through various sources like media, friends, or community events. Initial curiosity leads them to seek more information.
2. Families then actively gather information about fostering, including legal requirements, the process, and the responsibilities involved. They may seek out resources online.
3. Families discuss the process and indulge in reflection, considering the possibility of fostering, weighing the emotional, financial, and logistical implications. They confer the impact on their current family dynamics and lifestyle.
4. Families assess their own readiness and capability to foster, considering factors like time commitment, financial stability, emotional readiness, and support systems. They may seek advice from extended family, friends, or professionals.

How to be a foster parent

ROHEI Foundation, Philippines meet a lot of families who have genuine interest in foster care, but simply don't know how to get started in the foster care journey.

<https://youtu.be/UxjURcsu310>

⁹ How to be a Foster Parent in the Philippines – A Department of Social Welfare and Development video

¹⁰ The Fostering Network – Why I foster <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/cathy-glass/why-i-foster>

5. Interested families make initial contact with foster care agencies, DCPUs or NGOs to express their interest and gather more specific information. They might attend orientation sessions or meet with social workers to understand the next steps



6. Screening and Training Process: -Families undergo a formal screening process, including They participate in mandatory training programs to prepare for fostering.

7. After completing the necessary screening process, background checks, home assessments, and interviews and receiving approval, families make the final decision to commit to fostering. They prepare their home and family for the arrival of the foster child.

Being familiar with these steps can significantly inform and refine media campaign strategies. along with insights on how to tailor media campaigns to address each stage

3. Undertaking Media Campaigns with Clear Strategies

Creating a detailed media plan must commence with identifying the target audience and demographics, outlining goals, and specific actions to recruit foster families. This would be based on the initial assessment of the need as who are the children waiting to be fostered? If there is an ongoing Foster Care Program, it would be relevant to know who are the children already being fostered and who are the foster families fostering these children. An initiative in Thailand in the text box is worth reading.

The target audience can be segmented into those that know very little about fostering and those that know more about it and are considering becoming a foster carer either now or in the future.

Campaigns could primarily focus on the female population as the majority of enquiries tend to be from females who tend then to pass on the information to their partners.

Target Audience

- Reside within 10 kms of the agency's office or in a locality as a cluster (for easy access and formation of support group as practiced by IAPA (Mumbai) Vathsalya Charitable Trust (Bengaluru) in locating foster families
- Have adequate space or a spare bedroom for the child
- Have time to devote to a child
- Have experience and skills in caring for children
- Are in good general health
- Are financially stable (middle and low middle class families may be more appropriate to assimilate child and ensure easy transition to birth families)
- Want to make a difference.
- Able to offer placements to older children.

Public Awareness Campaigns could be conducted through various media channels to educate the public about the need for foster families. Caution needs to be taken not to expose the identity of children in need of foster care as they may fall prey to exploiters.



- Digital Media Campaigns: Utilizing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn to reach a wide audience without on the privacy
- Print Media: Publish articles, opinion pieces, and advertisements in newspapers and magazines in the vernacular to reach a broad audience, especially in rural areas
- Traditional Media: Advertising in magazines, local press and radio can be relied upon heavily for fostering recruitment. Broadcast interviews, stories, and advertisements on popular TV and radio channels and slides in theatres showing films as was done by KSCCW. Whilst there is still merit in advertising in some highly targeted traditional media, the cost tends to be a lot higher than online advertising. Further the circulation of local press has been decreasing in recent years as people consume more news via the internet.

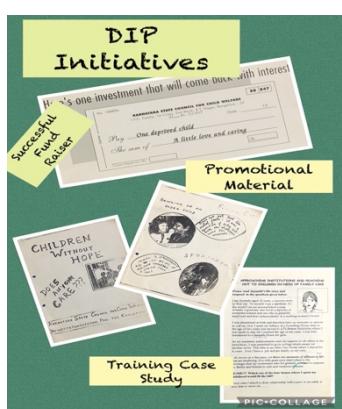


- Ambient media: Advertising on the rear of buses is cost effective methods of advertising outdoors and has the benefit of travelling around the city as was relied upon by KSCCW¹². To further build awareness locally it works best in conjunction with other channels such as having slide shows during the interval in movie theatres using the same content as was done by KSCCW.
- Direct marketing: Such as distributing leaflets via daily newspapers and printing on bus tickets, telephone bills and electricity bills and banners or posters in libraries and schools and colleges can prove

cost effective and quick way of attracting enquiries from people within a specific area. Events in the outdoors at fairs (farmers fairs etc) near parks and markets can also elicit interest.

¹² Image re-created of KSCCW's media effort as original was untraceable.

- Branding: Using promotional flyers and carry bags with distinct brand colours across all materials will give a consistent look and ensure that the advertising is recognisable can be used to spread the message locally.



- Informative Content: Developing comprehensive FAQs and offering accessible details on fostering via websites, brochures, and infographics. Create emotional and impactful content to inspire and encourage people to foster children. Tailoring messages to different stages of the decision-making process, addressing specific concerns and motivations at each stage such as including emotional storytelling via videos and social media and providing accessible information about fostering benefits and requirements.

- Testimonials: Sharing testimonials from existing diverse foster parents and children to show different perspectives and realities of fostering. Feature experts and highlight the positive outcomes and emotional rewards

- Orientation and Interactive Sessions: Advertising orientation sessions and conducting introductory meetings using targeted ads, community postings, and social media events. Conduct door-to-door campaigns in communities to provide information and answer questions about fostering. Host live Q&A sessions, webinars, and workshops with experts, social workers, and experienced foster parents to provide in-depth information.
- Consistent messaging: Maintaining messaging across all platforms and repeating key messages to reinforce the importance and benefits of fostering.
- Clear Contact Information: Ensuring all campaign materials provide clear and accessible contact information for local foster care agencies and support organizations.

Focus on the Marketing Objective

- Advertise via marketing channels and in media that offer the best return on investment/reach the target audience.
- Use the “drip, drip” approach while Repetitively publicising the need for foster carers in the local community
- Send out clear messaging leading to inquiry calls
- Continually monitor the success of Different marketing activities and Drive improvements



By aligning media campaign strategies with the decision-making process of prospective foster families, campaigns can effectively address their concerns, provide necessary information, and inspire them to take the next step towards fostering.

4. Collaborating with all relevant stakeholders

- Organising workshops and campaigns in collaboration with government bodies and draw in NGO entities to inform them about the fostering process and benefits. Leverage NGO networks and government frontline personnel such as Anganwadi, ASHA workers, Panchayat¹³ functionaries and resources to maximize reach and impact.

¹³ KSCCW got the Director of Women and Child Development, Karnataka to hold consultations at the Divisional level (4-5 districts) with the heads of several departments to discuss alternative care services leading to the

- Bringing adoptive and foster families together to discuss areas of common interest and promoting mentoring amongst them
- Arranging community events and collaborating with local media to feature foster families' stories. Involving local community leaders to foster a supportive environment for foster care. Addressing cultural and religious sensitivities that may affect the willingness of families to foster children.
- Organizing awards to recognize and celebrate outstanding foster families and publicly appreciate their efforts to encourage more families to become foster parents. Ensure media coverage.
- Arranging regular information sessions and workshops in communities, schools, and workplaces to educate people about fostering. Host Foster Care fairs where interested families can interact with District child protection units, NGOs promoting foster care, social workers, and other foster parents.
- Partnering with temples, churches, mosques, and other religious institutions to spread awareness and encourage community members to become foster parents. Engage local leaders, influencers, and celebrities to endorse and promote foster care.
- Building corporate partnerships to run internal campaigns encouraging employees to consider fostering. Offer workshops and seminars in corporate settings.
- Keeping the community informed with regular updates on the progress and success of the foster care program through newsletters and social media.



Implementing a combination of these strategies can create a robust and comprehensive campaign to recruit foster families, ensuring that more children in need find loving and supportive homes.

5. Approving families and assisting with registering on CARA's designated portal CARINGS while adhering to the legal framework

The first step in recruiting foster families involves a thorough screening process. Crucial factors to be considered would be the safety, well-being, and development of the children who would be placed in their care. This would include:

- Pre-foster care counselling.
- Undertaking background checks including criminal records, financial stability, and previous experiences with children.
- Assessing the home environment in terms of living conditions to ensure a safe, clean, and nurturing environment and adequate space and facilities for the child.

district officials submitting a plan of action of how they will promote and execute the same. Required follow up support of DIP social workers.

Keeping communication going with those showing first interest!

Make them feel valued. Share specific messages assuring these families who are further down the line in considering fostering. Address why they should choose to foster and share what the agency will offer:

- Continuous personalised support
- Training and placements

- Ensuring that the home complies with health and safety standards with all family members are in good health
- Assessing the emotional stability and psychological readiness of the prospective foster parents.
- Confirming that the prospective foster family has a stable income to support the child's needs and their ability to provide for

the child's educational, medical, and general well-being.

- Evaluating the long-term commitment of the family to foster care in the best interests of the child
- Considering cultural, religious, and social factors to ensure the child's smooth integration into the family and the family's openness to supporting the child's cultural and religious identity.
- Ensuring that the foster family has access to a strong support system, including extended family, community resources, and professional support services.

6. Offering training, support programs and implementing a system of regular monitoring and supervision

Pre-placement Training

Developing training programs in collaboration with experts to prepare families for fostering by social workers. The training module must typically cover a wide range of topics including:

- Child Development and Psychology: Understanding the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of children, particularly trauma informed care, handling special needs children and keeping relationship with birth parents or foster care leading to adoption
- Legal and Policy Framework: Familiarizing foster parents with the legal aspects of foster care, including their rights and responsibilities, and the policies governing foster care in India.
- Health and Safety: Training on basic health care, hygiene, nutrition, and safety measures to ensure the well-being of the child.
- Behavior Management: Techniques for managing challenging behaviors and promoting positive development.
- Cultural Sensitivity: Encouraging respect for the child's cultural, religious, and linguistic background to ensure a smooth integration into the foster family
- Providing clear information on the legal process, rights, and responsibilities of foster

Post-placement ongoing Support and Training

- Regular Home Visits: Social workers, DCPUs and CWCs conducting periodic home visits to monitor the child's progress and to offer guidance to the foster parents.
- Support Groups: Foster parents can participate in support groups where they can share experiences, seek advice, and receive emotional support from peers.
- Counseling Services: Access to professional counseling services for both the child and the foster family to address any emotional or psychological issues.
- Advanced Training: Ongoing training sessions on specific topics such as adolescent care, dealing with trauma, and special needs care to enhance the foster parents' skills.

- Sharing information on available resources, such as financial assistance under government or other grants
- Using surveys and feedback forms to gather insights from prospective and current foster families to refine and improve recruitment strategies.
 - Conducting regular monitoring and evaluation of foster placements to ensure the well-being of the children.
 - Implementing a system for regular monitoring and supervision by social workers.
 - Establishing mechanisms for feedback from the child and foster families to voice their concerns and take in suggestions.
 - Ensuring that the recruitment process adheres to the model Foster Care guidelines and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, Amendment 2016.
 - Supporting foster families to adopt their foster child, after two years of fostering the child provided the child is legally free for adoption.
- Ensuring smooth transition of children who leave their foster care families after the age of 18. Such young persons should be supported by after care service where necessary.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) in partnership with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) plays a pivotal role in ensuring the optimum preparation and training of foster families and ensuring a supportive and nurturing environment for foster children.

7. Possible Challenges in running a Foster Care Program

Running a foster care program involves numerous challenges. By understanding the potential obstacles ahead of time, social workers and administrators can better prepare for and address the issues that arise during the recruitment process.

1. Emotional and Behavioural Needs of Children: Such needs can be complex as children struggle to adjust to the new family situation, miss their families or previous environment, and may grapple with making strong connections with new family members.
2. Trauma-Informed Care: Many children have experienced significant trauma. Providing adequate training and ongoing support to foster parents to handle various situations, including trauma-informed care will enable them address the same effectively
3. Cultural Incompetency: The cultural and linguistic needs of children can be diverse and adjusting to a new cultural milieu can be struggles. Families in foster care require specialized training and resources to cope with the situation.
4. Difficulties in reuniting with biological Families: Working with and providing support to biological families to facilitate reunification when possible can often be challenging.
5. Placement Instability: Minimizing the number of moves a child experiences is vital as this can impact the child's sense of security and well-being.
6. Retaining Foster Parents: Keeping qualified, compassionate, and dedicated foster parents can be a constant challenge.



7. Administrative Burden: Managing the extensive paperwork, compliance with regulations, and coordination with various agencies can be overwhelming for program administrators.
8. Navigating legal and Regulatory Issues: Abiding by court orders and regulatory requirements can be complex and time-consuming.
9. Limited Resources: Ensuring sufficient funding and resources to provide high-quality care and support services is often difficult due to budget constraints.

8. Generating a Foster Care Database of experienced and potential foster families and making recommendations to CARA and State Governments

The primary goal of creating a Foster Care Database is to streamline and enhance the management of foster families by efficiently tracking their screening, training, and placement status. Such a database on both experienced and potential foster families can be at different levels -within an agency, a community, the State or even the country.

Key Components:

- Family Profiles: Basic Information: Names, contact details, addresses.
- Experience Level
- Preferences: Age range and number of children they are willing to foster.
- Screening Status: Background Checks: Completion status and date of the last check. Home Inspections: Results and compliance status. References: Verification and approval status.
- Training Status: Dates of mandatory training sessions attended, topics covered. Specialized courses completed, certifications obtained and overall compliance status with training requirements.
- Placement History: Details of children currently placed with the family. Past Placements: History of past foster children, duration of stay, and outcomes. Availability: Current availability status for new placements.
- Policy Reforms: Advocate for policy reforms that streamline the foster care process and provide better incentives and protections for foster families.

Creating such a data base would invariably:

- Improve efficiency by streamlining the process of matching children with suitable families and ensure tracking all families so that they are up-to-date with screenings and training.
- Provide transparency in terms of having in place clear records of family participation and compliance
- Identify families needing additional support or resources

While creating the data base, implementation considerations must be kept in mind:

- Data security to ensure sensitive information is protected and access is controlled.
- Design of the database needs to be user friendly to be accessible and easy to use for caseworkers and administrators.
- Protocols must be established for regularly updating family information and compliance status.
- The database could be integrated with other child welfare systems and databases.

By generating a comprehensive and dynamic Foster Care Database, agencies can significantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their foster care programs, ultimately enhancing the well-being of children in need of foster care.