

Foster Care.

What young people
in the system say is working.

Office of the
Family & Children's
Ombudsman

Appreciative Interview Report
January 2001

Office of the
Family & Children's
Ombudsman

Foster Youth Appreciative Interviews
January 2001

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Ombudsman appreciative interviews.....	3
First theme: feeling normal.....	4
Second theme: feeling cared about	5
Third theme: feeling my opinions matter	10
Findings and recommendation.....	12
Young peoples' ideas to improve foster care	14
The young people interviewed by the Ombudsman	16

This document is available in alternative formats to accommodate persons with disabilities,
and can be obtained by contacting

The Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman:

Phone (206) 439-3870 • Toll Free (800) 571-7321 • TTY (206) 439-3789 • Fax (206) 439-3877

The report is also available on our Web site: www.governor.wa.gov/ofco

Foster care.

What young people in the system say is working.

Introduction—The State’s foster care problems are well known, and they are receiving considerable attention and study by state policy makers, agency officials and children’s advocates.

Less known is what aspects of the foster care system are working well. Unlike its shortcomings, the system’s strengths have received little attention or study. Efforts to improve the foster care system therefore have been and continue to be devoted almost exclusively to fixing problems. Few attempts are underway to support, reinforce, and amplify those things that are working well.

With these thoughts in mind, the Ombudsman undertook a project earlier this year aimed at learning what is working best in the foster care system. The Ombudsman approached this task by seeking out the perspectives of young people in foster care—it is their lives that are the most directly affected by the system, yet their voices are often missing.

Nearly everyone has heard what is wrong with the foster care system:

Acute shortage of family foster homes, as well as other placement options, for children.

Foster parents often do not receive the training, support and respect they need to adequately care for children.

Needs of many children coming into foster care are not timely assessed or addressed with appropriate services.

Children too often experience numerous and abrupt placement changes during their stay in foster care.

Many young people in foster care feel stigmatized, sensing that they are outsiders who are treated differently because they’re in foster care.

Many children in foster care continue to experience prolonged uncertainty about their future.

Many youth “age out” of foster care lacking adequate preparation for adulthood.

The Ombudsman approach was based on the belief that young people in foster care have the most to teach adults about what in the system is working well and matters most to them.

The primary objective in this project was to explore the potential effectiveness of a strength-focused approach as a means for creating foster care system improvements. Historically the Ombudsman has pursued the mission of promoting improvements by identifying and analyzing system problems and gaps through complaint investigations and system reviews. In this project, the Ombudsman intentionally sought to move away from this analytic, deficit-oriented approach to see what could be learned about system change and foster care through direct communication with young people about their best experiences.

**The Ombudsman initiated
this project, because
change can be achieved by
identifying what works
and focusing energy on
doing more of it.**

The Power of Stories—The Ombudsman project was heavily influenced by a system change approach called *Appreciative Inquiry*. This approach starts with the assumption that any human system is filled with powerful and largely untapped stories of effectiveness, high performance, strengths and emerging possibilities. It asserts that by engaging the system in a comprehensive discovery of these “success” stories and the conditions that make them possible, the system is able to create and focus energy on replicating and enhancing strengths and successes in unprecedented ways.

The Ombudsman appreciative interviews.

The first step in an Appreciative Inquiry process is to determine what topics are to be studied. Positive, open-ended questions about these topics are then developed and used by the system's participants to interview each other. Sometimes hundreds and even thousands of participants are involved in the interview process. The interviews elicit stories that provide a glimpse of what kinds of experiences are possible when the topics of study are most evident and alive. When the interviews are completed, the stories are synthesized (usually by the interviewers themselves) to identify prominent or compelling themes, as well as to uncover the conditions in the system that made the stories possible. This step is followed by a period in which the system's leaders and participants design and then implement an ideal vision of the future that is grounded in the best of what is already working in the system.¹

The Ombudsman identified several topics of study.

These included learning about young people's best experiences in the following areas:

1. **Generally.**
2. **Feeling cared for and accepted.**
3. **Taking initiative and responsibility.**

The Ombudsman was also interested in soliciting young people's ideas for ways to make their experiences in foster care the best they could be.

With these topics in mind, the Ombudsman developed the interview questions on this page, through which to elicit young people's stories. Ombudsman staff, and one contract interviewer, conducted individual interviews of 32 young people, aged 11 to 17 years old, residing in licensed family foster homes. All had been living in foster care for at least one year. Average length of stay was four years; average number of placements was four. The interviews were conducted privately, and most occurred in the young person's foster home. For a complete description of the interview process, see page 16.

The Interview Questions

1 During your time in foster care, you have probably had some tougher times and some better times. For now, I'd like you to remember one of the really good times you've had. It might be a particularly good day or week, or any time when things were going really well for you. Or it might be a great talk you had with someone; or any time you remember as being really special—a time when you felt really good and happy.

2 Think about a time while you've been in foster care when you felt really taken care of by an adult. This could have been a time when someone was really kind or caring, or a time when someone listened to you or helped you get what you wanted.

3 Think about a time while you've been in foster care when you felt really taken care of by an adult, who seemed to just understand what you wanted or needed without you even asking.

4 This next question is an important question for most people and you may need a moment to think about it. It can be a great feeling to be accepted, included in things. Think of a time during your foster care experience when you felt a part of things. This could be a person who made you feel accepted or a part of a group where you felt included.

5 Now I'd like you to think for a moment about your own strengths and gifts. Specifically, I'd like you to remember a time that you went after something that you wanted. It might have been something big or something quite small. Anyway, there was something that you realized that was important to you, and you said to yourself, "Go for it," and, as a result, you made something good happen for yourself.

6 Imagine that you had magic wand and could make anything happen. What three wishes would you have that, starting right now, would make the rest of your time in foster care the best experience you can imagine?

7 The last thing we want to ask you is how adults—who would really like to help—could make a difference for kids that are in foster care. I'd really like to hear your ideas.

Prominent Themes—In each story there is truth from a young person's perspective about something in the system that works for them.

After synthesizing all of the high point stories and ideas elicited through the interviews, the Ombudsman identified three prominent themes. The identified themes reflect the Ombudsman interpretation of the participants' collective perspective on what in the foster care system is working well and matters most to them. The themes are followed by the stories or ideas that best reflect them.

1. For more information about Appreciative Inquiry see OD Practitioner: Journal of the Organization Development Network, Vol. 32, No.1 (2000).

First theme: feeling normal.

What matters most? Feeling like part of a family.

From the perspective of the young people interviewed, success in foster care happens when they feel and are seen by others as not being different. They describe success primarily in terms of feeling and being treated like a regular part of their foster family.

“When I moved in, [my foster parents] made me feel real comfortable. They showed me my room and asked how I wanted to decorate it.”

“I feel like I’m part of the family. When we go to family events, my [foster] brother will say, ‘Come on, be a part of this. You are part of the family.’”

“When I got here it felt...like a normal family. There were four kids and two adults... The home I was in before—the foster mother was too old. There were no other kids in that home. I feel very accepted and included now in my foster home. I am treated like a member of the family. They don’t treat me different—for example, if I do something special, like I was in a play last summer, they didn’t all show up to come and see me in the play. Whoever could make it came to see me, and I liked that because that’s the way it would be for any other family member.”

“My foster mom would make me pull weeds or she would ground me when I was bad. But she didn’t treat me differently from the way she treated her grandkids.”

“Being with my guardian makes me feel like a normal kid. It was hard getting moved around, and now I know I’m going to stay here.”

“The first foster home I was in, we were a family. They were mom and pop. My brother was in the foster home with me, which is probably what made it the best. We always did stuff together. It didn’t matter what we did, we did it together. It was just that you had their [foster parents’] attention and it couldn’t be taken away, not by the phone or any interruptions. What we were doing could not be interrupted. It didn’t matter what we were doing, just that we were doing it together as a family.”

“My foster parents now are great. They don’t treat me like a foster kid. I call them mom and dad. They let me do things like this is my home. They let me paint my room any color I wanted. They give me money to buy things.”

“My [relative foster parent] made me feel accepted in numerous ways: by teaching us the rules of the house; taking us places with her, like to family gatherings; going on family trips to visit relatives; being told ‘I love you’ and getting hugs; having two dogs and two cats.”

“I don’t feel like an outcast. When you first enter a home, you feel like you’re interfering. That’s hard. Here, I feel like part of the family. Here, it’s not so much what they do, it’s their attitude. They don’t treat me like a foster kid. I feel like I can just be myself and they don’t have expectations that I have to live up to. They include me when they go places, like to family get-togethers, and when they introduce me they say, ‘This is my daughter.’ They believe that blood doesn’t have anything to do with being part of a family, and that is what I believe too.”

“At Thanksgiving, our [foster family’s extended family] came over and treated us like we were their own cousins, or nieces and nephews. They gave us hugs, they did stuff with us, and bought stuff for us.”

“My first Christmas in foster care. There were lots of people and everyone made me feel welcome. They treated the foster children the same as their own children. They didn’t introduce us as ‘Oh this is a foster child.’ They seemed to know what we were going through and made us feel welcome. My foster parents introduce me to people as their ‘granddaughter.’”

“The thing is, this [foster] family knows me. Holidays, Christmas, birthdays—they always include me. Even if I’m in a bad mood, I get included. I am included and part of everything. When we have the family picnic, I don’t know everyone, but everyone acknowledges that I’m part of the whole scheme. All the relatives just accept me as family.”

“Last year at Christmas [my foster family’s] whole family was here and their grandchildren. I actually felt like part of the family. I really liked that. They were nice and treated me like a brother.”

“The first two weeks after I moved in [to this foster home], one of the coolest times I’ve ever had is when I got to stay up late playing video games and watch TV and stuff. It felt normal. My foster parents were easy, lots of cats and two dogs. They accepted me and said I am the best kid they ever had and would like another kid like me.”

Second theme: feeling cared about.

"We have been working on [my foster parents'] second house in Ocean Shores. Everybody helped fix up the house. One of my foster brothers and I built a pathway. It was fun. It felt good to be included, and part of the family."

"I feel like family when we all get to go out to dinner. One time we went to Sizzler because it was my foster mom's cousin's birthday. The cousin was going to pay for all of us, but [my foster mom] said 'I'll pay for [me] and [my sister].' This felt really great, like she was saying, 'No, I'll pay for my kids.'"

"At this foster home, they would take me out to eat with their family. They had two little kids, and they would take me with them on their family activities. What probably made it easy for them to include me was that they took a lot of kids for a few days. I was the only one who was there long-term. I was there six months."

What matters most? Feeling cared about.

Young people said that success in the foster care system also occurs when they feel truly cared about. They describe success in the following ways: experiencing simple expressions of interest and caring about their feelings and needs—including their need for a connection with their birth family; being able to count on adults for security, structure and guidance; and having opportunities to discover and develop their potential. These experiences were touched upon in many high point stories.

"Show kids lots of love! I wish that other kids could be lucky like me and find good homes."

"Put kids in a family that really cares."

"I wish that all [foster] parents would be nice to foster kids. Be good to them—just like it was her child."

Experiencing simple expressions of interest and caring.

"My [foster] mom knows what I need without me asking. When my mom died, my [foster] mom held me tight. She got me through it and held me tight."

"I grew up taking care of myself. The most I've ever felt taken care of by an adult is here. Just little things make a difference, like [my foster mom] noticed my new pants and asked if I wanted to get my pants hemmed."

"Last year for my birthday [my foster mom] bought me some CDs that she knew I wanted. I didn't have to ask her, she just bought them for me."

"Once when I was really sick, my [foster mom] came down and slept with me. She washed my forehead with a wash towel, gave me aspirin, took my temperature and was really caring. It felt like she was my mom. I sit in [my foster mom's] lap and she will rock me and I can talk to her. I can share my problems and fears and tell her anything. I'm not used to so much attention. I think she understands what it is like because she was a foster kid too. Like after I visit my mom, sometimes my mom says stuff to me, and my [foster mom] will tell me, 'she doesn't mean it, it's just the drugs talking.'"

"When my older sister moved away to Arizona about a month ago, I was really upset. My foster father gave me a card. In the card, he wrote that he was sorry my sister was moving, and that he cared about me. I don't know how he knew what I needed. I was really upset, and I was crying. I was really happy when I read the card. It meant a lot. I just said thanks."

"When I first entered foster care, I was having a really difficult time with my mom. She has a personality disorder with, like, five different personalities, and it's hard to deal with. I didn't talk to anyone about things that were bothering me, and instead I just had a bad attitude. [My foster mom] knew something was wrong. Even though I had only been in placement with [her] for a month or two, I felt comfortable talking to her about my feelings. Before, I never opened up because no one listened. I just acted different and kept things inside. But [my foster mom] listened to me. I felt comfortable talking to her, and she showed me that other people cared about me too. Now it's easier talking about things that are bothering me."

Second theme: feeling cared about.

Experiencing simple expressions of interest and caring. *(continued)*

"It's a little thing, but I'm in sports and I get leg cramps. My foster mom always makes sure there are bananas because they help get rid of the leg cramps."

"My foster mother calls me into the kitchen and gets me to help her, and she talks to me."

"Last year at Christmas, I got everything I really wanted, and felt that I was loved. Not that I didn't before, but I didn't think they would really spend that much on me."

"When I'm mad, my [foster] mom knows and tries to get me talking. She keeps asking even if I have a hard time talking. It shows me she cares about me."

"Foster parents should not be afraid to show affection and bond with foster kids, even if they might move."

"In my first foster home, the first few days I was there I was feeling bad because I was missing my family. My foster mom called my caseworker and asked if I could have a visit with my family. My caseworker arranged it right away. We had a visit at the [DCFS] office, me and my five brothers and sisters, and my grandma. I don't know how my foster mother knew what I wanted, but I suppose she saw I was feeling sad."

"My dad died, and I was really sad and down. My [foster] mom was really nice telling me it was OK, and I would be all right. We talked about my feelings and that she would always be there to help me. She listened to me a lot and took me to lunch."

"I felt really happy on my last birthday. My foster family made it really special for me. They brought cake and ice cream, and sang to me, and we just sat around and talked. What made it so special was just having people around me that really loved me. It was different from my other birthdays because when I was living with my dad, he would make me plan my own birthday and he didn't really plan anything special. This was different because they just surprised me, and I didn't have to do anything."

"My foster mother recently—for a surprise because I am on the Honor Roll at school—bought me a new king size comforter and some special deep pocket sheets for my bed. She took me shopping, and I picked out what I wanted and the sheets go perfect!"

"At Christmas, my foster parents bought me a CD Walkman, a Tweetie sweater, and some overalls. They knew I wouldn't be getting anything for Christmas. It made me feel good inside because I wasn't expecting anything, and no one had done that for me before. I said, 'thank you very much.' I felt like crying. It was very nice. I just let them know I appreciated it."

"The first day I came here, I was nine. It was almost Christmas. At Christmas I got a Super Nintendo. It was special. I got a lot of stuff. I didn't expect any of that."

"One day, my [foster] mom and I spent the day together. It was just a regular weekend day. We cleaned the house together, then we went to the store together. Then we made dinner for everyone at home, and we went to a restaurant for dinner and to see a movie, just the two of us. What made it so special was spending time together by ourselves."

"My foster mom gets me things without me having to ask, and she seems to know when I need something. Like, she just seems to know when I need more socks—and I don't know how because I do my own laundry. I will just come home from school and there will be a bag of socks. Sometimes she'll buy me new clothes or stuff for my hair. She always gets the right size of clothes."

"My foster mother had six foster kids in her home. She would buy us all our own toiletries, shampoo and deodorant and things, and she would put our name on the things so it was just for us. It's the only foster home I've been in where we didn't have to share things like that. When I went to my last foster home, I didn't have any thick, warm socks to walk around the house in, and my foster mother just bought me some and set them on my bed like a gift. I guess she knew I needed them as I was walking around barefoot in the winter!"

"My social worker sent me a clothing voucher in the mail without me asking for it. It was August, with plenty of time before school started, and I wasn't expecting it at all. I was really happy I could get new clothes for school. Next time I saw my caseworker was when he did a health and safety visit, and I thanked him."

"I have a good caseworker. She always gets back to me when I call and remembers things, like if I need a bus pass or a clothing voucher, she doesn't forget. She also went out of her way for me to arrange my counseling so I could stay with this counselor. It has been a lot of hassles with insurance, but she did it."

"Last year, I was starting at a new school and moving into a foster home at the same time. My Spanish teacher just sensed something was wrong and asked if I was okay. She was new at the school, and I didn't know her, but we talked and I could relate to her. At Christmas, she gave me a little angel anonymously. I knew she gave it to me, and I asked her. But she said she didn't and that it must mean I have a guardian angel."

"My teacher last year recognized that I shouldn't be in special-ed classes. He got me out of special ed into the regular school program. Now being in special ed won't work against me when I'm in college or whatever. Now I am taking all the right classes, and I'm fine with my pre-college requirements. He moved me to sophomore English too. If it wasn't for that teacher, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of special ed. To make it simple, it felt good."

Supporting connections with my birth family.

"When I first moved into foster care they let me go see my mom. I really needed to see my mom...I wish I could visit [my adult sister] more often."

"I wish I could be out of foster care and be living with my sister and she would be my legal guardian."

"Last year, during the summer, my foster mom and my [foster] family—my sisters and my uncle—went to Louisiana for a week to visit my 101 year-old grandmother. She was healthy and just great! She didn't seem 101. She was so happy to see us. There was also an 80 year-old uncle. We just wanted to go see relatives."

"When I first moved to my aunt's [foster home], I thought it was another foster home. I had not met her before and didn't know she was my aunt. Immediately everything was different. She wanted to get to know me and my brother, and she told us all about our family. Because of my aunt, I have gotten to know my grandmother, great-grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Every other year we visit relatives in California. I am happy to be with family."

"I would see [my grandmother] every two weeks or so, and she would always plan ahead for things for us to do. She knew us and the things we were interested in and what we liked to do. It makes me feel good that someone knows what I like and cares enough to want me to be happy."

"A really special time was about two weeks ago when I met my brother for the first time. Actually, he last saw me when I was three years old but I don't remember him. My foster parents really care about my family. I told them I wanted to meet my brother, and they talked to my caseworker about it. My sister knew where he was living. My brother is 32 years old now. He has his own family. His whole family came over here to my foster home and we had a two-hour visit. Meeting him and his family was great. I had talked to him on the phone a couple of times. He was really funny. He made me laugh. I really like that [my foster parents] care about my family and they made this happen for me."

"My grandma lives nearby and my foster mother let me go see her. She said, 'I don't want to hold you back from your family.'"

"I'm happy when I visit my sisters. It's fun, and we like to see each other."

"I am happy whenever I go down and see my sister and her family. They accept me for who I am. My brother-in-law asked me why I hide my feelings. He thinks about me. They are very much a part of my life, and I can talk to them about anything. They both treat me like a person. They love me, and they show it."

"My older sister (age 17) would come and find me when I had a fight with my foster mother. I would usually go up to the school, which was only about four blocks away. My sister would come and talk to me. She would give me advice and make me feel more comfortable. She would talk me into going back. My sister knew I needed someone to talk to, someone who cared about me. I would feel much better after talking to her."

"My only wish is for them to hurry up and get the visits with my mom figured out. We are going to have visits at my grandpa's house and he will supervise them. My grandfather, my mom and my [foster] Dad are going to sit down and talk about rules and guidelines for the visits. I want to have visits with my mom, but this won't be that often, just once every three months or so."

"I wish my brother could live me. He's in foster care with a relative in Idaho. We were very close when we were younger, but we grew apart. I think they should put brothers and sisters together in the same home."

"Sometimes the State will say you can't have contact with your brothers or sisters—at one time I wasn't allowed to talk to my brother, except for once a year. That's way too little, and I got out of touch with my brother."

Second theme: feeling cared about.

Supporting connections with my birth family.

(continued)

"I wish I could stay with my sister and brother who is in the system some other place. He's 16, and I wish that him and me and my sister could be together."

"I think that caseworkers should help kids find their parents. My caseworker says, 'I'll do it' but then he doesn't do anything. I tell him how to find my dad and he says, 'That's a good idea,' but when I ask him again, he hasn't done the good idea or anything else. I think he has some information that he does not tell me, but I don't know for sure."

Being able to count on adults for security, structure and guidance.

"I've been [in this foster home] for seven years. I feel safe here."

"I used to be afraid of losing this placement, but now I'm more secure because I'm in a guardianship."

"Last year I was having trouble in math and my foster dad showed me so many steps until I just learned it."

"One day while I was working this past summer, I missed the last transit bus and I was really scared I would be left there all alone. I called home and my foster mother answered. I was worried no one would be home. She said right away that she would come and pick me up and told me not to worry. When she picked me up she gave me a big hug. What I needed was for someone to tell me it was going to be OK. I was so relieved. It made me know she cared because she came right away."

"My very first foster mom accepted me. I was really scared when I first went into foster care, and I locked the keys in the car one time. She didn't get mad. One time I was sick, and she let me stay home, and didn't get mad."

"They were going to put me in a foster home in Ellensburg, but I said I would wait at the [crisis residential center] because I didn't want to move away and change schools. It was near the end of school when I finally moved to my new foster home in Yakima. It was very scary because I didn't know where I was going or who would be there. I found out I knew [my new foster mother's son] from school, so then I felt better. I wish that I could stay here in this foster home for the rest of my time in foster care."

"If had a foster child, I'd make sure they had discipline. Make sure they do their homework. Someone has to be in charge, someone has to make sure things get pulled back in line, and to provide some consistency. Consistency, structure and organization. That's what kids need to have the home be complete."

"In this foster home, we know what the schedule is going to be, we know what happens each day and what we need to do. Some kids are lost, they don't know whether they are coming or going, and they are put in so many different foster homes."

"My foster mother walked me to my class the first day of school and introduced me to my teacher. She talked to him for a while and made it easier than I thought it would be. She hand-picked my teachers. New schools are always hard. I was worried, but things turned out OK."

"My foster parents paid attention to my grades. They wanted progress reports from school about how I was doing, and they were willing to help me with my homework. They put me on a homework schedule where I could play after school but at some point I had to get down to my homework. They gave me a lot of attention and a lot of love. They helped me with my social life too. They taught me good skills for making friends and asking girls to dance and stuff."

"My foster mom got me help with my phonics. My foster mom's friend got me into a reading program, and it helps me a lot. She knew I needed help reading. I can read chapter books now. I just read the first page of a Harry Potter book. The only things I want for my birthday are chapter books. My foster mom's friend comes to the house to help me with my reading."

"In sixth grade, I was getting really bad grades. I wasn't doing my homework. My [foster] Mom helped me get better grades. She helped me everyday after school and, in the seventh and eighth grade, I got better grades. Now I do my homework every day after school, and my grades are good. It's not hard."

"When I first moved into foster care, I had a negative attitude. I did okay at home, but at school I was getting Fs. I was rude, had a smart mouth and would tell teachers, 'F-you.' But every night, my [foster mom] would sit here at the table and make sure I worked at my homework. I got straight As and won a citizenship award at the end of the year, and then won it again the next year. I never thought I was smart, but now I've turned into this good student, 'Ms. Preppy.'"

"My [foster] mom showed me how to budget money so I won't overspend."