



## Family Connections Early Education Program

**FosterAdopt Connect** is an association of foster and adoptive families dedicated to providing support and advocacy to create a more caring and effective child welfare system. Our services help families gain the resources they need to be effective, loving caregivers, and help foster children find their Forever Home. We were originally founded in 1998 as a small support group for Kansas City area foster families. We have since grown into a large, multi-service nonprofit agency with 160 employees, five resource centers (located in Independence, Cameron, Poplar Bluff and Springfield, Missouri, and Olathe, Kansas) and thousands of members in the Midwest and beyond.



**Family Connections Shelter:** FosterAdopt Connect's Family Connections Shelter is an innovative program designed to provide a fast-paced, intensive and comprehensive service delivery approach to safely and effectively reunify children with their birth families whenever possible and to provide them with familiar and well-supported alternative relative or kinship placements when reunification cannot be achieved. Currently located at our headquarters in Independence, Missouri, this shelter serves about 170 children and families annually from the Kansas City metropolitan area, including Jackson, Lafayette, Clay and Cass counties.

**Preschool Program:** The Family Connections Early Education Program was originally created in response to the large number of children served through the shelter who displayed developmental or academic delays. The overall goal of the Family Connections Early Education Program is to work with

the child's placement team (including case managers, family members and parents, and other relatives) to identify developmental/academic delays that may impact the child's ability to transition into kindergarten, develop individualized development goals and implement a plan to achieve these goals as soon as possible to make progress on the identified delays in a short period of time (typically 30–90 days).

**Need:** Although children enter foster care for myriad reasons, many share characteristics that leave them at risk for developmental delays. A recent study found that "with a national sample of 1,138 children younger than three years with substantiated cases of abuse or neglect, 46.5 percent were classified as having developmental delays on the basis of assessments" (Rosenberg, Smith, and Levinson, 2007). We have found that many of the children served through the Family Connections Shelter show signs of developmental delays.

Another challenge faced by these children is the lack of access to early education opportunities. A 2003 research review conducted by a consortium of child welfare researchers found that "although early education is essential for this population, data indicate[s] that only six percent of foster children under age six attend Head Start" (Vandivere, Chalk, and Moore, 2003).

Over the past four years, we have recognized a significant need for preschool services among the children we served and were troubled by the difficulty we encountered in trying to access these services on their behalf. Children receive placement in our shelter for a short period of time (30-90 days) – making it fairly difficult to enroll them in any long-term preschool program. Due to the overwhelming need for these services among young foster children, and the aggravating lack of services in our region, we decided to create a short-term preschool service within our shelter facility that works to identify potential delays and implements individualized education plans.

**Program overview:** Young children (ages 0-5) staying in our shelter are assessed for developmental delays using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3). The ASQ-3 is a series of 21 parent-completed questionnaires designed to screen the developmental performance of children in the areas of communication, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, problem solving and personal-social skills. There are different versions of the ASQ-3 for different aged youth, ranging from infants to kindergarten aged children. The age-appropriate questionnaire is completed by the parent or caregiver – or for children who are not part of the rapid reunification program by shelter staff or case managers. Outputs from this assessment are used in conjunction with information from the child’s placement team to develop daily curriculum that focuses on the areas where the individual child may show signs of a delay.



Typical preschool activities include a variety of group play activities, motor-skill development, reading and literacy development, interpersonal/social skills activities and outside play. Shelter staff maintain a 1:4 staff to child ratio – ensuring a high level of attentiveness and safety for the children.



**Outcomes:** Given the high risk for developmental and educational delays within the foster child population, our primary goal is to provide services to children staying in our shelter that help them achieve a greater level of developmental parity with their peers in the general population.

The specific outcome we intend to produce is: A majority of participating children will demonstrate progress toward achieving age-appropriate developmental milestones. We will have achieved this outcome when 85%-90% of participating children demonstrate progress as indicated by the ASQ-3.

Due to the variety of children with specific needs we encounter through our work in the Family Connections Shelter and the short duration of their typical stay (between 30 and 90 days), we do not have a specific numeric benchmark for ASQ-3 scores that indicates success. Rather, we seek a general increase in the domains where the child may be experiencing a delay, as indicated by their initial/final ASQ-3 assessment. Given the significant trauma many of these children have experienced, moving the mark in a positive direction can sometimes correlate to a significant improvement in global functioning and school readiness. Essentially, we want the child to experience a higher level of functioning when they leave the shelter – setting them up for a lifetime of academic achievement and placement stability.

**Mission:** As an association of foster/adoptive families, our primary goal is to increase the quality of life experienced by foster and adopted children, and for the various families in whose homes these children reside. The Family Connections Early Education Program is a direct iteration of our mission to serve these children and families. We invite interested parties to contact our agency to learn more about the Family Connections Shelter and its Early Education Programming.



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