



QIC•AG

**IMPLEMENTING PATHWAYS TO
PERMANENCY 2: PARENTING
CHILDREN WHO HAVE
EXPERIENCED TRAUMA AND LOSS
LESSONS LEARNED
IN TEXAS**

OVERVIEW OF THE QIC-AG

The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) is a 5-year project working with eight sites, each of which is either implementing an evidence-based intervention or developing and testing a promising practice, which if proven effective, can be replicated or adapted in other child welfare jurisdictions. Effective interventions are expected to achieve long-term, stable permanence in adoptive and guardianship homes for waiting children as well as children and families whose adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

The QIC-AG is funded through a 5-year cooperative agreement between the Children's Bureau, Spaulding for Children, and its three university partners: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVENTION

Foster parents and relative caregivers who are committed to permanence sometimes become discouraged when they encounter the difficult emotional, behavioral, or mental health issues often rooted in their foster child's experiences of trauma and loss. The Texas site team determined that proactively providing families with tools and skills to help them care for children who have experienced trauma and loss was the best approach to reaching two goals: (a) minimizing disruption in adoption and guardianship families, and (b) increasing the number of families willing and able to move forward with permanence. To provide these critical tools and skills, the Texas site team implemented the parent/caregiver curriculum, *Pathways to Permanence 2: Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma and Loss* (hereafter, *Pathways 2*). The *Pathways 2* program was developed by the Kinship Center (www.kinshipcenter.org), a member of the Seneca Family of Agencies in California, a nonprofit mental health agency. The *Pathways 2* program uses a seven-session group format to guide adoptive parents, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and guardians through robust discussion and activities

designed to strengthen their family. The Texas site team limited *Pathways 2* participation to "active caregivers" of children in permanent managing conservatorship of the state. An active caregiver was defined as an adult who is serving as either a temporary or a permanent caregiver for a child living in the home, or an adult who is engaged with the child through visitation, phone calls, or therapy and who is willing to have the child return to the home.

Pathways 2 has four primary goals:

- » Provide families with both a practical and a clinical understanding of childhood trauma, grief, loss, and the impact of these experiences on children.
- » Help families recognize and address core issues of adoption and guardianship that might arise while establishing permanence.
- » Empower adults to respond effectively and with greater empathy when children present difficult behaviors.
- » Stabilize families as they help children heal from trauma.

¹ Kinship Center. (2012). *Pathways to Permanence 2: Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma and Loss*. Details available at <http://www.kinshipcenter.org/education-institute/classes.html>

SNAPSHOT OF LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ESTABLISH THE STAFFING STRATEGY FIRST FOR A SMOOTHER IMPLEMENTATION

Establish a screening process to aid in selecting staff with the right skills for the program

Assess each candidate's ability to prioritize the outreach to families and delivery of the intervention into their daily work

Compensate staff for program activities that go beyond their regularly assigned responsibilities

2. BUILD IN SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES TO MAKE IT EASY FOR THEM TO SAY "YES" TO THE INTERVENTION

Provide options for child care to eliminate one of the most common participation barriers

Support families with features such as food and transportation subsidies to drive registration and sustain engagement over time

Offer families expense reimbursement and cash-value incentives as a way to encourage consistent participation and increase retention

3. PLAN SCHEDULES AND SECURE VENUES EARLY ON IN THE PLANNING PROCESS TO MAXIMIZE REGISTRATION



LESSON 1: ESTABLISH THE STAFFING STRATEGY FIRST FOR A SMOOTHER IMPLEMENTATION

Strategically selecting staff who will deliver the intervention can do much to minimize conflicts later in the process—meaning all staffing options for the intervention should be fully explored. Initially, the Texas site team recruited staff from the Foster and Adoption Home Development Program of the Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) to deliver the *Pathways 2* curriculum. This strategy presented three challenges: selecting staff and preparing them with the right skills, protecting time that staff could devote to facilitating and delivering the *Pathways 2* intervention, and setting meaningful compensation within a limited budget.

SKILLS MATTER

One key to the success of any program is selecting staff with the right skill set. The initial recruitment of *Pathways 2* facilitators was restricted to DFPS staff who volunteered; as such, the recruitment did not include an application or a screening process. Even though the DFPS staff selected as *Pathways 2* facilitators were experienced in foster care and adoption development, each had varied experience delivering training. Furthermore, the fast-paced implementation revealed that additional support was needed for facilitators to learn and integrate the new curriculum.

It is worth noting that if the Texas project had used a structured recruitment and selection process that included an assessment, then the recruiters could have been more strategic in hiring staff from the outset by selecting only those applicants who demonstrated an ability to learn and teach the *Pathways 2* principles with fidelity. Ultimately, the Texas team interviewed and brought on additional facilitators from partner agency providers and community entities. This recruitment effort integrated staff with a diversified skill set into the curriculum delivery. In addition, this co-training model presented a robust and comprehensive experience for participants.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

The delivery of an informative, interactive program requires staff to have sufficient time to prepare for and facilitate the sessions. However, when staff roles with an intervention fall into the category of “other duties as assigned,” staff experience competing priorities. DFPS staff initially selected as *Pathways 2* facilitators had other primary responsibilities to manage—with their existing job responsibilities often taking precedence when competing priorities arose. The system must find ways to staff the intervention with dedicated positions so that staff can commit the time needed for a full, high-quality implementation of the intervention.

COMPENSATION COUNTS

When the intervention responsibilities are assigned “above and beyond” existing job duties, staff should receive additional compensation. Compensation demonstrates the program’s value as well as the value the program places on staff, and deepens the staff’s commitment. Without compensation, staff members may be more likely to give priority to existing job duties. If providing additional pay is not feasible, then it is important to consider offering other types of meaningful recognition or reward for taking on additional tasks. In the Texas intervention, DFPS later allotted funding to provide merit pay for the *Pathways 2* facilitators.

LESSON 2: MAKE IT EASY FOR FAMILIES TO SAY “YES” TO THE PROGRAM

It is essential that families have the supports they need to participate in the program. Supports not only help overcome barriers to participation but also help keep families engaged throughout the program. Examples of such supports include providing reliable child care while parents are in sessions, offering light meals or refreshments, and providing incentives along the way. Committing to a 7-week program is difficult for any family, especially a family that is actively parenting. Therefore, it is critical to anticipate what supports will make it possible for families to participate.

CHILD CARE IS CRITICAL

Many families struggle with securing appropriate caregivers for their children, even for a short period. Providing quality child care during the intervention sessions reduces a critical logistical barrier for families. Staffing the child care with qualified attendants—that is, attendants who clear background checks and have the skill set needed to watch children who are dealing with trauma and loss—allows more parents to register, participate, and attend more consistently.

“There would be a lot fewer families taking Pathways to Permanence 2 if child care wasn’t provided. Having meals provided was great, but we couldn’t have done this without child care.”—Lindsey Van Buskirk, DFPS Regional Director

Providing child care also meant the project needed a venue with adequate space. At times, finding the right venue took extra effort and time solely because of the amount of space needed. On some occasions, the large numbers of children in the child care setting were best managed by separating the children by age ranges. This separation allowed child care attendants to better meet the needs of the group and to more successfully manage behaviors. Finding venues with adequate space was challenging.

The site team decided to contract with a private provider for child care. To ensure child care was always provided with an appropriate ratio of adults to children, the team developed a flexible system for assessing child care needs for each session. When on-site child care cannot be provided, an alternative is to provide incentives, subsidies, or reimbursement so participants can secure child care on their own.

FOOD MAKES EVERYTHING BETTER

Providing food to welcome the group to a session can make participants feel cared for and valued. Food helped to keep the participants engaged as well as created opportunities for the group to interact informally during a casual, shared experience. In addition, providing food is a practical tool that encourages families to attend. For example, an evening training

will likely span the dinner hour. Providing a light meal at the session removes the burden on families of preparing a meal and eases the family schedule, which can go a long way to support participation. At each *Pathways 2* session, DFPS provided food for all the active caregiver participants and their children.

PROMOTE PARTICIPATION WITH REIMBURSEMENT AND INCENTIVES

Some rural families had to travel long distances to the training venue. Even for those closer to the venue, participation in a “free” class still had transportation costs. Providing a gas card or mileage reimbursement for participants can motivate families to attend sessions by emphasizing that their participation is valued. The site team provided families with a \$10 gift cards to offset transportation expenses; cards were distributed at the end of each session. For families who relied on public transportation, additional supports were needed to enable these families to attend sessions held at night or on weekends. The site team and families with transportation hardships discussed options to develop and secure alternative transportation. In addition, incentives such as gift cards helped encourage caregivers’ engagement and commitment to the program objective. The active caregivers who attended at least 5 of the 7 sessions received a \$50 bonus gift card.

LESSON 3: PLAN SCHEDULES AND SECURE VENUES EARLY ON IN THE PLANNING PROCESS TO MAXIMIZE REGISTRATION

Just as “concurrent planning” in case management is complicated, so is balancing the calendar and venues for training. If the planning is not done early enough to allow sufficient time to find and book venues, then securing sites and setting the schedules can exhaust resources.

Initially, *Pathways 2* scheduling and venue setting was done quarterly; however, this approach proved difficult because the team waited to set the schedule until after recruiting participants. However, for many families, knowing upfront

where the training sessions would be held made it easier for families to commit to the program. Ultimately, the team changed course to set the schedule and locations a year in advance.

With a limited budget, a top priority was finding free meeting spaces, but free spaces were difficult to locate, especially when multiple spaces were needed for child care and the training. This issue was compounded by the length of time these spaces were needed. Although there might have been community organizations willing to let the project use their space, securing free space often required booking far in advance to ensure availability. Ultimately, the site team decided it made more sense to pay for space, which would streamline planning time for project staff and the families.

In the course of delivering more than 20 series of *Pathways 2*, the best practice that emerged was to complete the schedule for all class series as far in advance as possible to hit the enrollment goal. Without a confirmed schedule, staff conducting outreach had less time to encourage families to participate and less time for promotional materials to be mailed or distributed to families (e.g., Save-the-Date postcards and Register Now fliers.) In addition, a longer lead time allowed more opportunities for community partners to promote the intervention to the families they served.



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