



PRIORITIZING AND PLANNING PARENT OUTREACH
FOR ADOPTIVE AND GUARDIANSHIP FAMILIES:

QIC-TIPS FOR SUCCESS

QIC•AG

INTRODUCTION

In addition to valuable programming insights from the interventions supporting adoptive and guardianship families in the eight partner sites, the QIC-AG learned essential and practical lessons about parent outreach; an element of implementation that can sometimes be overlooked.

To be effective, parent outreach typically requires a deliberate, multi-faceted approach that includes; crafting a poignant message for the target audience, determining who is best to deliver the message, ensuring cultural appropriateness and authenticity, as well as clearly determining when and how the messages and information will be delivered.

As a result of their collective work, the QIC-AG teams learned prioritizing and planning for parent outreach is a key ingredient to ensure the most helpful/best intervention is delivered to the intended target population.

LESSON #1:

SUCCESSFUL PARENT OUTREACH BEGINS WITH A DELIBERATE STRATEGY AND DOCUMENTED PLAN

Developing a plan for parent outreach either as part of the initial design and implementation process (IDIP) and/or broader communications plan is essential. Developing this plan early in the overall process requires teams to think proactively about why the outreach is being conducted in the first place, who is best to conduct it, and when the optimal time is to conduct the outreach. A detailed roadmap for parent outreach guides the overall direction of the work with clearly defined actions steps and identifies the roles and responsibilities of team members in executing the plan. Once in place, a solid plan will allow for pivots when strategies are not as effective or circumstances call for a different course of action. Ultimately, the plan will be there to help the team stay on task even when adjustments are needed to address changes such as personnel transitions or a lack of uptake. Documenting the parent outreach process upfront helps to ensure the overall successful delivery of the intervention.

The QIC-AG team in Vermont found that incorporating a thoughtful and complete parent outreach approach was critical to successfully implementing the Vermont Permanency Survey. The team had to think of every aspect of outreach from transactional logistics needed to deliver the survey to the target population to incorporating the most informative and inviting language to motivate parents to participate. Who, how and when the messages would be delivered required a thoughtful and strategic approach.



QIC TIP

Christina Shuma, Site Implementation Manager in Vermont

“In order for the work in Vermont to be effective, a well-thought out and documented plan for parent outreach had to be a priority from the very beginning. This required a strategic plan and the codification of process in order for the team to have a roadmap for this aspect of the work. For systems and professionals working to engage families in services and supports; be sure to dedicate time and energy upfront to planning for parent outreach and consider using an existing theory to ground your thinking such as Karen McCurdy and Deborah Daro’s “Parent Involvement in Family Support Programs: An Integrated Theory” which offers important models and context for parent outreach. Ultimately, having well-documented plans and processes in place will give your team confidence, the ability to track progress, and allow for adjustments should challenges and/or opportunities arise.”

LESSON #2:

CREATE MESSAGES THAT WILL RESONATE WITH YOUR TARGET POPULATION

A family is less likely to participate if it does not seem that the service will meet their needs. Therefore, it is critical that the team considers the messages they wish to include in communications to parents. It is essential to accurately identify and assess the needs of the target population to determine the type of service to be offered. Message development should be informed by:

- » Characteristics, demographics, or past experiences (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, placement history, family structure) of the target population
- » Eligibility and exclusionary criteria
- » Geographic service areas
- » Needs (e.g., parents or guardians who lack the capacity to address trauma-related issues, or lack of parental skills and ability to manage behavior)

Based on both data and stakeholder feedback in Illinois, adolescence was identified as a high-risk period for adoptive and guardianship families because of added stressors that can emerge during this developmental period. Armed with this knowledge, the Illinois site team determined an effective approach to alleviating these stressors would be to teach coping skills to youth (pre-adolescent or adolescent) and their caregivers before they were experiencing issues.

With the target population identified, the team began to shape the messages to introduce Trauma Affect Regulation: Guide for Education and Therapy program (TARGET) and encourage enrollment. In an early effort to recruit families, the site team developed an informational flyer that read, "TARGET is a unique approach to preventing disruptions and helping families prepare as teens who have experienced trauma move through what can be difficult adolescent stages." Because of the use of words such as trauma, this message did not resonate with families who were "doing fine". Because the message did not match the families' sense of need, they did not sign up for TARGET. After receiving feedback from stakeholders, the site team revised the flyer so that it aligned better with the needs of the population: "In any family, stressful times can come up, especially during the teen years. Even when things are smooth, big and small life stressors can take you by surprise. We want to ensure that your family has supports that can be helpful during your child's teen years."



QIC TIP

Christine Feldman, (need title)

"Development of a strong message hinges on targeting that message to a clearly identified population and making sure you understand what might resonate with that population. The work of crafting strategic messages for families also requires listening to what is working and what is not, and trying new messages when a course-correction may be needed."

LESSON #3:

HOW MESSAGES ARE DELIVERED MATTERS

Today, there are a myriad of ways to communicate ranging from social media to emails to texts and calls to letters delivered to mailboxes. As a result, it is important to remember that we can't conduct one-time outreach via one channel of communication and think the job is done. For example, the rise of electronic delivery of subsidy payments has resulted in a decrease in accurate mailing addresses. Acquiring email addresses has only recently been included in information gathering. Obtaining contact information requires teams to consider alternative methods such as using search engines. In addition, as everyone has busy lives and receives countless messages a day, researchers tell us we will have to reach out approximately 6 times to get someone engaged. This means professionals need to spend the time and energy to be sure all appropriate methods of communication for a project are covered.

The team in Catawba County, North Carolina, implementing "Reach for Success" a post-adoption coaching service ultimately decided that communicating by mail was going to be the most effective way to reach potential families. Once this decision was made, the team developed a process to verify the accuracy of the mailing addresses for the initial survey, cross-referencing contact information for the target population. In Vermont, the team laid out an integrated and detailed plan to conduct parent outreach utilizing many channels over several weeks to administer their survey. Their plan included initial program announcements, save-the-dates, formal invites, and a series of phone calls and follow-ups where professionals that already had a connection to parents would reach out using a specific script about the program. And in NJ the team utilized their website, made phone calls, sent letters in the mail and emailed as part of the parent outreach process for their "Tuning into Teens" intervention.



QIC TIP

Karen Norton, Site Consultant in Vermont

"Teams should have a systematic approach for collecting parent contact information from various sources including conferences, meeting, and events. Once collected, the time consuming process of verifying accurate and active email/ mailing addresses as well as telephone contact information for parents is a critical next step. Once you are confident in the accuracy of the contact information and ready to communicate with parents, it is also important to research the optimal times for message delivery which can increase the chances for engagement in the content you are sharing. This is true whether you are sending an email, sharing information via social media, calling, or sending a letter."

LESSON #4:

WHO DELIVERS THE MESSAGE MATTERS

Once you know what you want the message to say, it is important to think about and plan for who will deliver the message. Because you don't want to turn families away before they learn about what is being offered, determine the individual or agency to whom families would be most likely to respond positively and who is best positioned to deliver the message. For example, some families will have a negative feeling associated with child welfare agencies. With this in mind, the teams in Illinois and New Jersey put a great deal of thought into this aspect of parent outreach, codifying plans for who would conduct parent outreach for their interventions.

The team implementing TARGET in Illinois was concerned that families might not open mail if it came from the Department of Families and Children (DCFS) and as a result reduced the number of times DCFS was mentioned in written communications and refrained from using their logo on mailing materials. In New Jersey, the site team implementing TINT relied on staff from the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Adoption Operations unit to conduct the outreach because these staffers were experienced in interacting with New Jersey families who had attained permanence. The New Jersey team invested in considerable time training DCF staff on the family recruitment process for TINT and provided a script that staffers could refer to when conducting outreach calls to families.



QIC TIP

John Webb, Site Implementation Manager in New Jersey

"Identifying the best individuals or entities to conduct outreach can be just as important as understanding who you want to target. A well-crafted message about the availability of services and supports may fall on deaf ears if delivered by the wrong person so spending the time to think practically about who the communications come from is important and increases the opportunities for utilization. Don't let the outreach be carried out by whoever is available at the time, if possible, think creatively and step away from what may have been done in the past. Try new ways of doing things including different messengers to be sure your target is receiving the information in the best way possible."

LESSON #5:

CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS AND AUTHENTICITY ARE MUST-HAVES

Supporting families that are providing permanence through adoption and guardianship requires a high degree of empathy and authenticity. With that in mind, the tone and cultural relevance of the information about programs and services is an important consideration. To ensure families recognized and welcomed communications for services, the team implementing Family Group Decision Making with the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska engaged elders within the tribe to help with language and naming the program. Language was not the only cultural element that needed attention, because tribal members did not always have mailing addresses where communications could be sent, team members needed to allocate the time to drive directly to family member's homes to make connections.



QIC TIP

Dondeineita Fleary-Simmons, Site Consultant, Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska

"In FGDM, outreach is considered the first phase of the intervention. It is time consuming because it sets the tone for everything that is to follow. By demonstrating respect for cultural values, through the inclusion of the elders, and culturally specific tools, families came to trust the outreach. Given that many families could not be reached without going to their homes, it was also important to allow the outreach Coordinators the time needed to locate and engage families. Because of these efforts, families shared that they felt that the outreach was designed to honor them. The community recognized themselves in the process. As one Coordinator shared, ***"Our people have done this before. We had it right, this [culturally adapted FGDM] is bringing back our old way of doing what is right for our families"***"

LESSON #6:

MESSAGES MUST BE CLEAR, CONCISE, AND INCLUDE DETAILS TO HELP FAMILIES MAKE GOOD DECISIONS

When delivering a message it is important to share the basic elements of the program or service that is being offered, as well as any details that will help a family determine if participation in the program is viable. This should include details about incentives or services that may remove barriers to participation. The Texas team implementing Pathways to Permanence 2, a training program for those parenting children who have experienced trauma, grief and loss, realized to engage as many families as possible in the 7-week program and increase the intent to enroll, it was critical to succinctly communicate they were willing to help solve practical challenges by providing child care, meals for children and families, and financial support to cover transportation costs.



QIC TIP

Stephanie Hodge-Wolf, Site Consultant in Texas

“Knowing parents have so much to juggle, outreach should be kept brief yet informative and include important details so families can make good decisions and commit to a program or service. Making sure families know some of their essential needs will be covered as part of a program helps to build trust and show care at the outset and gives parents the practical information they can use in the decision-making process.”

LESSON #7:

PARENT OUTREACH REQUIRES RESOURCES AND BANDWIDTH

While each QIC-AG site-specific team dedicated varying amounts amount of time and resources to parent outreach, they all realized that a good outreach plan would go to waste if they did not have the supports needed to implement it. To effectively conduct outreach, there are many details that must be attended to such as crafting the message, developing the materials, copying materials, contacting and following-up with families. In addition to energy and mental capacity to complete, these tasks also require staff and monetary resources. Therefore, it is critical to consider all of the supports needed to execute the outreach plan as designed. In Vermont, it was necessary to hire a part time administrative assistant to obtain and verify contact information. Without this new hire, the steps associated with the verification process would not have been attended to with precision and would have likely compromised the successful administration of the survey.



QIC TIP

Leslie Cohen, Project Director QIC-AG

“Prioritizing parent outreach as an important element in building relationships means you have to plan for the work to actually get done. This requires allocating enough staff and resources to execute outreach on an ongoing basis throughout the entire project. While not everyone on your team will make a phone call, sign a letter, or send a text or email all members of the team should work together to support reaching out to the parents that may be in need of support.”

CONCLUSION

While new, evidence-based services are needed to support the changing landscape for adoptive and guardianship families today, focusing solely on the services alone is not enough. Our first step must be to connect with families through strategic and intentional outreach. We'll need creative and innovative approaches to establishing connections with families with whom we may have had little recent contact. Building connections with parents through thoughtful and proactive outreach with relevant information, delivered consistently and in many different ways will help to create the conditions for parents to confidently engage in the services and supports their families may need when they need them.



Funded through the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant 90CO1122. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funders, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This document is in the public domain. Readers are encouraged to copy and share it, but please credit the QIC-AG.

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