

Changing the Training: Nevada

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It was the autumn of 2020, and like so many of us, a family in Reno, Nevada was having a tough time. Parents Rob and Hazel had held onto their jobs – Rob, as a lead salesman at a car auto shop and Hazel, as a supervisor at a wholesale food distributor – which provided a comfortable life for the couple, Rob's two-and-a-half-year-old son, Alex, and the couple's infant daughter, Sara. But the family had also dealt with a substance use disorder and Rob and Hazel were facing additional strains on their marriage. Things were starting to unravel.

Through a series of unfortunate events, including a mental breakdown by Rob and an attack on Hazel that ended in her hospitalization, Alex and Sara were admitted into emergency foster care through the Washoe County Human Services Agency.

Rob and Hazel were devastated. "It felt like the whole world was trying to break us down," Rob said.

An Agency Permanency Worker had initially estimated that the children's reunification to living with Rob and Hazel would be a long haul; based on the initial crises, the worker predicted a one-year foster care stay for Alex and Sara.



Nevada foster parents Zack and Raina.

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- Agency Permanency Worker

“There are case-specific reasons why a kid gets removed from a home, and for Rob, the biggest challenge was accepting it,” the worker recalled. “He was angry and focused on the unfairness of the decision, and couldn’t see that there were things he needed to do to get back on course with his family.”

If there was anything positive for the family during this traumatic time, it was that the children were placed with Zack and Raina, who were among the first group of Reno foster parents trained under the county’s newly adopted Quality Parenting Initiative system reform. As part of the QPI approach, biological parents and foster parents share information and ideas about how to improve parenting and family relationships, so that every child gets the excellent parenting they deserve.

Zack and Raina had begun dating as teens, and as they helped out with childcare activities through their church, they saw many children affected by neglect and abuse. So they vowed to find a way to help support children in need, and after they had their oldest daughter, the couple became foster parents in 2016. The training they received on how to be “QPI foster parents” changed the course of their lives.

Since adopting QPI in 2014, Nevada has cultivated the practice of partnerships between birth families, caregivers, child welfare agencies, and judicial partners. Throughout the local system of care, Washoe County’s QPI brand promotes a culture of well-being through respect, empathy, understanding, communication, and good working relationships between families and staff.

This philosophy has been woven through the caregiver pre-service training, continuing education, and practice efforts. For example, the county has developed a Parent Partnership Plan that specifies parent and agency staff roles in supporting parent partnerships and working together toward reunification; has changed their practices to adopt child-centered transitions that allow for preservation and prioritization of relationships; and has established a Family Engagement Center to allow for visitation time that includes child(ren), birth parents, and caregivers. Additionally, the agency supports early connections between caregivers and birth parents, through initial “comfort calls” and “icebreaker” meetings.



Zack and Raina cared for two-and-a-half-year-old Alex and baby Sara.

“If you accept kids the way they arrive in your home, you have to be equally willing to accept and understand their parents and what they’ve been through. But you also have to be willing to believe that those parents will respond to authentic support.”

- Zack

In Washoe County, agency leadership provided training opportunities for staff so they could support parents with this new model, and ensure that parent training was reinforced in case management. To ensure training and practice changes were successfully implemented, agency leadership regularly prioritized working with both birth and foster parents.

By November 2020, when Alex and Sara came into their lives, Zack and Raina knew that their role was to be part of a team alongside the birth parents. Through their QPI training, they knew that the early relationship of birth and foster parents leads to success for the child.

“We had those QPI ideals instilled in us from the get-go, and we hit the ground running,” Zack said. “If you accept kids the way they arrive in your home, you have to be equally willing to accept and understand their parents and what they’ve been through. But you also have to be willing to believe that those parents will respond to authentic support. If they trust you, that’s half the battle.”

"We were a mess, but Raina put the kids on FaceTime so we could see they were okay, and she made me feel like we could take the time we needed to work things out."

- Hazel

The comfort call, QPI 's practice of an early conversation with the birth and foster parents, happened within 48 hours of the children arriving in Zack and Raina's home.

"We were a mess, but Raina put the kids on FaceTime so we could see they were okay, and she made me feel like we could take the time we needed to work things out," Hazel recalled.

Mental health counseling for Rob's anxiety and depression was imperative, and he warmed to the idea of working with Zack and Raina, who turned out to have a lot of constructive ideas that would prove helpful. Both of the children have developmental delays, and Raina, who is a teacher, had noticed during initial visits that Rob and Hazel could use mentoring on identifying with and supporting their kids.



Hazel took much comfort in being able to FaceTime with her children while they were in Zack and Raina's care.

That led to a major decision. Instead of the standard practice of arranging family meetings in a local park or County building, Zack and Raina invited Rob and Hazel to their home. Over dinner and during the toddlers' bedtime routine, Zack and Raina found plenty of opportunities to model ways of nurturing the children's development, followed by some very real conversations.

"When people take the time to really understand what's going on with you and show you that they really care, you want to let them know you appreciate it."

- Rob

Zack recalled one talk in particular between himself and Rob that proved key to moving forward in a healthy way.

"I told him, 'Look, man, you may not like some of the rules, and you may be angry about how this played out, but what's more important than your kids? What's more important than getting your family back? You've gotta get it together,'" Zack said.



The two families spent time together at Zack and Raina's home.

"That's the thing – when people take the time to really understand what's going on with you and show you that they really care, you want to let them know you appreciate it," said Rob, who began to look forward to chatting with Zack about healthy parenting.

The early relationship established as part of the QPI principles, allowed the relationship between the birth and foster families to flourish and grow. That steady, non-judgemental support helped lead to a successful outcome for everyone involved. Six months after Alex and Sara arrived at Zack and Raina's home, Rob and Hazel completed all of the requirements for reunification, and their children returned home.

For Zack and Raina, this type of ending cements their commitment to fostering. Rob said he felt real hope for his family's future.

"Now I know there's help out there, and I know where to go to help my kids when they need support," Rob said. "I don't ever see things getting out of control again as they did."



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Practical resources & Additional reading

For system leaders

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership:

A State and Local Leader's Guide to Building a Strong Policy and Practice Foundation.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sec3f22c53ca04100a128ff2369207b82>)

For parents and caregivers

The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership:

A Relationship Building Guide offers practical tips to help build partnerships and strengthen communication between the important adults in a child's life while in care and after.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/sfbf4965b0cb04a4cb3aee4a034aa2042>)

For case workers

A one-page "user's guide" for how child welfare agency leaders and staff may consider introducing and using the guide.

(<https://ctfalliance.sharefile.com/share/view/s0a552c5927fb4fc39b63ea0cea553ab8>)

