



**State of Florida
Department of Children and Families**

Charlie Crist
Governor

George H. Sheldon
Secretary

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 3, 2010

TO: Regional Directors
Circuit Administrators
CBC Chief Executive Officers
CBC Board Chairs

FROM: George H. Sheldon
Secretary 

SUBJECT: Normalcy

Recently, a young person told me: "Stop calling us foster kids! We're just kids."

It's great advice, but it's not just about what we call these young people...it's how we treat them. So I am calling on everyone in the child-welfare community to make it a consistent and high priority in the months ahead to assess every decision and action by the standard of whether it treats children in foster care like every other child.

Youth in foster care should be able to do things that any other child does, within the limits of their abilities, their foster parents' own attitudes, and common sense. Their families experienced something severe enough to warrant the child's removal, and some of them need special care. Instead of continually reminding them and all their friends of this one feature of their lives, we need to focus on all the opportunities open to them. We need to think of them as the normal kids they are.

Florida law requires rules "balancing the goals of normalcy and safety for the youth and providing the caregivers with as much flexibility as possible to enable the youth to participate in normal life experiences."

In other words, we need to act like good parents.

All good parents worry about the safety of their children, but they know that children have to face the risks of daily life if they are to build confidence and character, gain life experience, and, ultimately, achieve happiness. So we let them drive, play sports, go on field trips, visit friends, have friends over, go on dates, and face new challenges every day. Our challenge is to give them the tools for making good decisions and acting responsibly.

I am not talking just about teenagers. I am talking about all children. All children are entitled to the most normal lives we can offer them.

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Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

Our policy is this: Every child in our care is entitled to participate in age-appropriate enrichment, extra-curricular and social activities. Caregivers should assess the appropriateness of the activity based upon the child's age, maturity, abilities and interests, but the assessment should be reasonable and avoid intrusive or bureaucratic actions such as "background screenings" unless there is a reasonable basis for doing so. Caregivers should know who their kids will be with and make provisions for their safety, but exclusion from an activity should occur only after consideration of less stringent alternatives.

The decision is up to the foster parent. We have licensed them for this responsibility. We need to treat them like parents, with the same authority to make decisions in the best interests of their children. Case managers may need to be involved on some issues of expense, and they, along with the rest of us, are there to provide counsel, support and oversight. We need to consult biological parents whenever it's reasonable, unless parental rights have been terminated. With reunification as our goal, we need to ask biological parents about their views on activities for their children and make a determination that takes their preferences into account.

We will promptly review any state or local rule, operating procedure, policy or custom that prevents or creates barriers to normalcy, including the use of terms that reflect bureaucracy rather than normal language. We invite anyone to tell us where we can improve and urge each CBC to review its own rules and practices using this guideline.

I am asking each DCF circuit administrator to work with our community partners to change practices to ensure responsible, common sense decisions by foster parents and, when involvement is necessary, by caseworkers and protective investigators.

I am designating Family Safety Director Alan Abramowitz as our "normalcy czar" to help resolve any issues that arise.

Finally, we have to stop referring to these young people as just "foster kids," and refer to them as kids or children or teenagers. They are simply children in foster care – and not for long, if we are doing our jobs well. A kid's job is to be in school, to learn from teachers, and to develop relationships through friends, peers, clubs, sports and activities since it's these skills that lay the foundation for successful lives as adults. It's what many of us experienced as we grew up and what we want for not just our own children, but for all children. Youth in care are no different.

Our decisions will not always turn out perfectly, as so many parents find with their own children, but our decisions have to be continually focused on the overall well-being of our children, not just a bureaucratic requirement or a "safe" decision.

It is the right thing for our kids.

Thank you for all you are doing to make life better for the children in our care.