People need strong family ties to overcome life’s enormous hurdles. But with troubled families, the challenges themselves can block the path to strong familial bonds. Hurdles like destructive communication patterns passed down from generation to generation, serious mental and physical conditions, poverty, joblessness, and lack of transportation, nutritious food and access to education. Often difficult and dangerous behaviors among the parents, kids or both further complicate matters – like substance abuse, domestic violence, neglect and criminal activity.

It’s common to judge the parents. It’s easy to blame the kids. Neither helps the situation at all.

What does? An understanding that resolving these severe, complex, and interconnected issues takes intense intervention at the family system level by counselors trained in methods developed specifically to address them. Children & Families First (CFF) equips families every year with skills and resources to achieve attainable, sustainable change through Functional Family Therapy (FFT) – a highly-structured 12 – 30 week program that works within (instead of against) the family’s unique culture, engages all family members, and uses treatment strategies that positively motivate families to become more adaptive and successful.

Founded in the 1970s by Dr. James Alexander, and expanded nationally in 1998 by Alexander and Thomas Sexton, Ph.D., ABPP – FFT has earned national acclaim as a model program by the U.S. Surgeon General, Federal Office of Juvenile Justice, and the Blueprints for Violence Prevention. With good reason: FFT has a strong track record: 35 years of research shows that it reduces risk factors and improves adaptive functioning, helping keep families together, children in school, and children out of foster care and the juvenile justice system.

“Our families benefit tremendously when we are able to align proven practices with their unique situations,” says Chief Clinical Officer Dr. Julius Mullen, Ed.D., NCC., LPCMH, who
oversees all CFF clinical programs. “We feel responsible and honored to provide high quality support for families based on the best available science.”

CFF uses the FFT model in several programs: the Intensive Outpatient day treatment program for adolescents, voluntary family counseling, and the Family Assessment and Intervention Response (FAIR) program – the Division of Family Service (DFS) “last chance” option for troubled families to avoid moving kids to foster care. It’s used widely at CFF because FFT is effective. In 2014, 81 percent of at-risk adolescents who completed FFT at CFF reported reduced risk for conduct problems, and 70 percent of adolescents and parents reported improved relationships.

When families come to FFT as a last resort through DFS, they are often frustrated, mistrustful, or resentful – because they’ve tried other interventions, treatments, and therapies which have failed to “fix their kid” or the problem named by the referring agency, says Program Manager Brenda Smith, who oversees CFF’s FFT programs. What they encounter with FFT is anything but the usual agency-based consultation.

FFT: “helpful in improving at-risk behavior, easing emotional and behavioral needs, and enhancing overall life functioning.”

Getting Everyone to the Table

First of all, the sessions generally happen in the field – literally the client’s home turf – not an unfamiliar, sometimes daunting, professional office setting.

Then, there’s the approach: a lot of times, an event has caused the referral, but FFT therapists don’t storm in and drill down on the referring event, says Program Manager Brenda Smith.

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3/5 criminal arrests were minors in 2012

602 children were in foster care in 2014

248 youth were in delinquent out-of-home care in 2014

*According to the most recent Kids Count, a national compilation of data that describes the wellbeing of America’s children.

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Brenda Smith, LPCMH, a certified FFT therapist and Certified Counselor through the National Board of Certified Counselors. Instead, “We start a conversation to learn who everyone in the family is. We try to find out what their concerns are, and how each member plays a role in that concern.”

Feeling really heard, maybe for the first time, matters a lot – especially with adolescents, who may see the therapist as just another adult who is going to tell them what to do. That makes a big difference, says Smith, who brings to her job 24 years of experience with children and families, has extensive administrative expertise in FFT supervision, and has worked closely with Sexton and Astrid van Dam, MSW, FFT – developers of FFT training and implementation.

“A Taste for Art of SOUTHERN DELAWARE

Join us on October 3rd, 2015 for our sixth annual A Taste for Art of Southern Delaware at Indy Hall at Independence, Millsboro, DE!

Our signature event offers a unique creative arts & culinary experience! Guests will mingle among the featured works of area artisans, available for purchase, while sampling creative dishes prepared by top gourmet restaurants from southern Delaware.

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We start a conversation to learn who everyone in the family is. We try to find out what their concerns are.

Building Skills

Once trust is built, therapy moves to setting specific goals defined by the family’s unique situation and equipping the family by practicing relevant skills, like problem solving and conflict management. In this phase, they start to really feel success and satisfaction. It’s delicate work, Smith says, especially when negative, even violent patterns of behavior have been reinforced through several generations.

“When someone says ‘my parents beat me and it kept me in line,’ it’s what they know, and directly challenging it can be destabilizing and really scary,” she says. “So we might acknowledge their experience, affirm the past and reframe the issue by asking, ‘is it working with your kid now? If not, would you be willing to try something different?’

The flexibility of the therapist is key, she says. “You can bring humor. Some do activities. We adapt methods to the family’s style, and build from their own hopes and expectations.” Say dad wants his son to graduate from high school: through discussion dad begins to see more support is needed for that to happen, so you focus on how dad can be that support.

This does some really important things. The obvious one: the son may get a diploma. But it also shows the son that his dad is there for him, and gives dad the satisfaction of putting his skills to work to help a situation. And that is the stuff familial bonds are made of.
With your help, Children & Families First can provide programs that help kids in Delaware grow up with a better chance of reaching their full potential.

There are many ways to contribute:

**Friends Campaign**
Gifts to this Children & Families First fund direct your dollars where they are most needed.

**United Way**
United Way of Delaware: #299 (partner agency)
United Way of Southeastern PA: #1466
Combined Federal Campaign of DE: #50028
State Employee Charitable Campaign: #50300

**Bequests & Planned Gifts**
Create a lasting legacy. Talk to your financial advisor about the benefits of bequests by will, charitable trusts, annuities, and residuary requests.

Babies served by the Nurse-Family Partnership show a 53% reduction in alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use as teenagers.

CONTRIBUTE at cffde.org

Neglected kids in Delaware are more likely to grow up to be substance abusers.

53%

MANY THANKS!
Jess Bain, Alison Houck, Jen Joseph & Julie Metz

Together, these four women have created a robust Sussex County Development team that is creating greater brand awareness for CFF in southern Delaware. They are all accomplished women, who in their spare time have found a way to make CFF a priority. Whether planning upcoming events, cultivating donors, reaching out to media, or connecting advancement goals to potential partnerships, these ladies are invaluable.

Show your support by attending and inviting friends and family to participate in the October 3 Taste for Art of Southern Delaware, and the December 12 Santa Fun Run.
FFT has a good success rate, because it aims to make real, small changes and build on them, Smith says. It’s not presented as a miracle pill, it’s understood “we all need to work here.”

**Holding the Ground Won**

After months of training, the family has more skills, confidence and resources. By this time, even the families that grudgingly came to the table often don’t want FFT to end. That’s what the final step – generalization – is for. It’s about teaching the family how to maintain and build on the ground they’ve won, after therapy ends. That’s why it’s so important that all along, the therapist has adapted to the family’s style: when it comes time for the handoff to independence, the skills must be fitting and natural, or they won’t stick.

Families can stay connected to CFF’s therapy team, even after therapy ends, Smith says, and that’s important. They may call the therapist years later with updates about how well their child is doing. Occasionally they call frustrated about a relapse. That’s where “booster sessions” come in. Either on the phone or in person, therapists can revisit skills the family learned to help get back on track. In this way, the therapist becomes a piece of the support system for many families.

It’s rewarding for both the family and the therapist to see how much change has been made over time, she says.

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**Major Highmark grant enables CFF to expand scope & reach of family therapy**

Functional Family Therapy (FFT) helps troubled families develop skills to meet challenges together. It’s been so successful that there’s a waiting list in Sussex and New Castle counties, and a growing client base in Kent County.

Now, Highmark has awarded Children & Families First a major local grant to expand FFT and broaden the expertise of staff in two other therapy models. With the $285,500 “Blueprints for the Community” grant, CFF will:

- **Hire two more full-time therapists to work with families throughout Delaware using the FFT model.** FFT is a nationally-recognized, highly structured 12 – 30 week program that engages all family members to facilitate attainable change. Developed to help youth with criminal and conduct challenges improve behavior and avoid Juvenile Justice, today, it’s also used for families with children with mental health diagnoses and families with a history of abuse and neglect, at risk of losing their children to foster care.

- **Certify Intensive Outpatient counselors in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).** CBT helps clients replace unhelpful thoughts and behaviors with productive ones. Developed to treat depression, it’s also effective for mood, anxiety, personality, addiction, dependence and psychotic disorders.

- **Train CFF staff in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).** DBT is one of a very few models to work with individuals who suffer from severe, complex emotion dysregulation disorders. The stress on families who have a child with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, chronic suicidality and self-harm can be overwhelming and contribute to family conflict. DBT is a highly-structured therapy that includes individual therapy, group skills training, telephone consultation, and structured behind-the-scenes therapist support.

This expansion advances CCF’s 2015-2017 Strategic Plan goal of creating a more integrated experience for clients.

“Relapse is inevitable if clients don’t have the right tools or support,” says Program Manager Brenda Smith, who oversees CCF’s FFT programming. “This expansion will enhance our ability to develop a strong continuum of care and serve more families.”

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**FAMILY PHOTOS**

**WHITE OAK LANDCAPES**

*Visit cffde.org in September for more dates*
OURMISSION
Children & Families First helps children facing adversity on their journey to adulthood. We use proven methods to help families raise their children so they can flourish.

OURVISION
Communities where children are nurtured, healthy, and safe, individuals are valued, and families are strong and self sufficient.

IT’s OUR PROMISE
It’s not just our name, IT’S OUR PROMISE Children & Families First strengthens Delaware families by delivering an innovative and effective continuum of community-based social services. In existence for more than 130 years, CFF builds the foundation for strong communities with child-centered and family-focused programs.

CORESERVICES
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