North Carolina is embracing family-centered practice in child welfare like never before. It is doing so because it believes this approach, which is based upon the notion that identifying and developing family strengths is the key to solving family problems, will lead to greater child safety and better long-term outcomes for families.

Our State also hopes the family-centered approach will help fix many of the problems—from inconsistent interventions to staff turnover—that plague child welfare agencies here and across the country.

Consequently, North Carolina has undertaken an all-out effort to ensure its child welfare system is family-centered. This effort can be seen in the many changes in children’s services policy and practice being pursued across the State right now. Chief among these are the new Strengths-Based Structured Intake form that, as of June 1, 2003, became the standard tool for screening reports of child maltreatment, and the development and evaluation of the Multiple Response System (MRS), which is expected to become the standard approach to child welfare in North Carolina in 2005.

The Catch
But there’s a catch. You see, even though the family-centered approach is the best way to work with families, it cannot be mandated.

True, structural changes like the ones we are making can encourage family-centered practice. But family-centered practice itself cannot be prescribed because when you get right down to it, family-centered is a philosophy, not a methodology.

That’s not to say that the family-centered approach is merely an attitude. Indeed, there are many specific techniques, such as the “Miracle Question,” the “Exception-Finding Question,” and other strategies associated with Brief Solution-Focused Therapy, that are used by most family-centered practitioners.

But to succeed with these techniques, workers must believe families are capable of creating solutions to their problems. To identify and build on family strengths, workers must believe the strengths are there to begin with.
Making this shift in thinking is easier said than done, especially for individuals working in agencies with policies and organizational cultures that are not particularly family-centered.

To promote family-centered practice and prepare counties to implement the Multiple Response System, the N.C. Division of Social Services and its partners have developed the Cornerstones of Family-Centered Practice. This training series consists of:

- **Multiple Response Is System Reform: The Future Direction of Child Welfare Services in North Carolina** (Cornerstone One), a course for anyone wishing to learn about MRS.
- **What Is Good for Families Is Good for Workers** (Cornerstone Two), a training for child welfare supervisors.
- **Partners in Change: A New Perspective on Child Protective Services** (Cornerstone Three), a course for child welfare social workers.
- **Working with Others, Working with Outcomes** (Cornerstone Four), a training for child welfare supervisors.

**Principles of Partnership**

Though they offer a chance to learn about and practice different family-centered techniques, each of the courses in the Cornerstones series is built around six principles of partnership:

1. Everyone desires respect
2. Everyone needs to be heard
3. Everyone has strengths
4. Judgments can wait
5. Partners share power
6. Partnership is a process

Developed by Appalachian Family Innovations (part of Appalachian State University), these principles are designed to promote and guide supervisors and workers in their pursuit of family-centered practice.

See the box above for an example of how one of these principles (“Judgments can wait”) might come into play during an exchange between a supervisor and a social worker.

Child welfare social workers and supervisors from county departments of social services interested in the Cornerstones of Family Centered Practice series should visit "N.C. Social Services Professional Development" [http://www.ncswtrain.org]. Here they can learn about the courses offered by the N.C. Division of Social Services, identify course times and locations, and register for training events.