

**CHANGE NOTICE: 03-2013**

**March 4, 2012**

**IV. SECTION .0800 | MUTUAL HOME ASSESSMENT**

A. [10A NCAC 70E .0801](#) PURPOSE

The subsections of this rule read:

*(a) The supervising agency shall conduct a mutual home assessment study of the foster home to determine if the home meets the requirements for licensure and is suitable for family foster care of children needing family foster care services or therapeutic foster care of children needing therapeutic foster care services.*

*(b) The supervising agency shall provide information to applicants that will make it possible for the applicants to make a knowledgeable decision about their interest in pursuing licensure. The supervising agency shall learn enough about the applicants to determine whether the applicants can meet the needs of children and care for children in accordance with licensing requirements. The supervising agency shall also learn enough about the applicants to determine the kind of child they can best serve.*

The mutual home assessment is the key document in the foster home licensing process. The Licensing Authority relies on this document to determine whether to license an applicant. The twelve parenting skills detailed in rule [10A NCAC 70E .1104\(a\)](#) are central to a comprehensive mutual assessment. The licensing social worker's mastery of these skills makes the mutual assessment a natural and beneficial part of the licensing process. Done well, the mutual home assessment enhances the foster parent/social worker relationship, which in turn increases the chance that children in foster care will have a caring and nurturing placement experience. The mutual home assessment is documented in the Foster Home License Application ([DSS-5016](#)).

The purpose of the mutual home assessment is to:

- Determine whether the home meets requirements
- Assure applicants make an informed decision
- Identify skills/areas for continued development by foster parents. It is unlikely that new foster parents will be proficient in all 12 skills instantly. Areas for development (needs) will emerge during a mutual home assessment that will have to be addressed and prioritized by the foster family and the agency
- Learn enough about the family to make effective placement decisions.

There are five parts to a Mutual Home Assessment:

- Part 1. Family History on each applicant
- Part 2. Assessment of the twelve skills of foster parenting
- Part 3. Assessment of the home for space to accommodate each child
- Part 4. Assessment of the applicant's ability to participate in shared parenting
- Part 5. Assessment regarding the applicant's financial ability to provide foster care

Keep these five parts in mind as you and the foster parent applicant go through the licensing process. The ultimate goal of the assessment is to determine the applicant's ability to care for children.

Many workers rely on the mutual home assessment document. The Licensing Authority uses it to decide whether an applicant can provide a safe and nurturing home for a child in care. The applicant family uses it to strengthen their understanding of the skills needed to care for children. Social workers placing children use it to decide whether a specific home can meet the needs of a specific child.

Take time to write this document so it is useful to these various readers. Use direct descriptive language. Do not use cognitive and affective terms (e.g., understands, appreciates, feels, supports, etc.) unless you provide evidence to support these judgments. Describe applicants by describing their behaviors. If an applicant has a skill, explain how you know that. Help the Licensing Authority understand why you have decided to recommend the family for licensure.

When an application for licensure is incomplete, the Licensing Authority returns the entire packet to the supervising agency for completion. One of the more common reasons for returning a packet is incomplete mutual home assessment information. If an applicant was married previously, there is a gap in employment, or there is something else that seems to call for explanation, the Licensing Authority expects to find a comment about it. The narrative should leave no doubt about the appropriateness of your recommendation for licensure.

B. [10A NCAC 70E .0802](#) METHOD OF MUTUAL HOME ASSESSMENT

The subsections of this rule read:

*(a) The mutual home assessment shall be carried out in a series of planned discussions between the licensing worker of the supervising agency, the prospective foster parent applicants and other members of the household. The family shall be seen by the licensing social worker in the family's home and in the supervising agency's office.*

*(b) In an application involving a single applicant, there shall be two separate face-to-face interviews occurring on two different dates. In an application involving joint applicants, there shall be a separate face-to-face interview with each applicant and an additional two face-to-face interviews with both applicants. The two face-to-face interviews shall occur on two different dates. There shall be separate face-to-face interviews with each member of the household 10 years of age or older. Training and group sessions do not count as face-to-face interviews. The assessment process shall be a joint effort of the supervising agency and the applicants to determine the applicants' suitability for providing foster care and the kind of child the applicants can best parent.*

1. Visits with the family

The professional relationship between the licensing social worker and the foster family is a key factor in the successful recruitment and licensing of foster families. The best way for a licensing social worker to assess a family's ability to provide foster care and meet the needs of the agency and the children the agency serves is through individual and group interviews with the applicants and members of the household. The applicants have to be seen by the licensing social worker in the family's home and in the supervising agency's office. Different and important issues and impressions arise when a family is seen in the comfort of their own home versus in an office setting. You need enough information to make a decision about whether you can vouch for the family as a safe and appropriate home for children in foster care.

For single applicants the face-to-face interview in the home of the applicant and the face-to-face interview in the agency's office on separate dates meet the requirements of the rule. For two-parent homes, two separate face-to-face interviews with each applicant on different dates as well as two face-to-face joint discussions with both parents have to be arranged. The joint discussions with both parents can occur on the same dates as the separate face-to-face discussions with each parent. For example the licensing social worker may meet separately with one parent at 1:00 PM, separately with another parent at 2:00 PM and then meet jointly with both parents at 3:00 PM. Separate face-to-face interviews with each member of the household 10 years of age and older must be held. Licensing social workers can use their professional judgment in deciding when and where interviews will take place with other members of the household. The licensing social worker needs to discuss with the children in the home their feelings about sharing their parents with other children, sharing their bedroom (if applicable), and sharing toys.

2. Extended Family

Extended family and friends need to understand what it means to care for a foster child. Extended family members and close family friends will serve as surrogate grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. to the foster children. Applicants need to have discussions with other family members and friends about their desire to become foster parents. It is important to understand how all family members will be affected by, and how they might affect, children being placed in the home.

3. Boyfriends and Girlfriends

Boyfriends and girlfriends of single applicants must also be part of the assessment process. Live-in boyfriends and girlfriends are considered foster parent applicants and must meet all licensing requirements. Boyfriends and girlfriends of applicants who visit the home of the applicant and have contact with foster children are considered members of the household and must be listed on the Foster Home Licensing Application ([DSS-5016](#)) and evaluated as a household member.

The licensing social worker will need to document on Part V of the DSS-5016 the type of visits (face-to-face, joint) where the visits occurred, and who was present. Do not include training contacts, group sessions, phone contacts, etc.

C. [10 A NCAC 70E .0803](#) ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The subsections of this rule read:

*(a) The supervising agency shall advise the applicants at the first contact with the agency of the North Carolina licensing requirements for foster care. The supervising agency shall make a decision whether to continue a mutual home assessment.*

The assessment process should begin the moment someone expresses interest in becoming a foster parent. During this first contact the agency gives information about the licensure process and the foster children the agency serves and their needs. If the applicant's motivation does not meet the agency's needs, inform the applicant that the agency does not wish to continue. For example, the applicant may wish to foster only one child of a specific gender, ethnic/racial background, and parentage. If there is little likelihood of such a child coming into care, the agency should inform the individual and decline to pursue licensure.

Foster home licensure is a privilege, not a right. Child-placing agencies have no obligation to license a home that does not meet the needs of the agency and the children in care.

*(b) The supervising agency shall inform the applicants about the services, policies, procedures, standards, and expectations of the agency regarding the provision of foster care services. The applicants shall weigh the responsibilities entailed in providing foster care services and make a decision whether to continue a mutual home assessment.*

Inform applicants as soon as possible how the licensure process works. Minimally provide the applicant with the following information:

- Services from your agency for foster parents
- Agency policies for foster parents including:
  - Rate of reimbursement
  - Criminal records checks, including fingerprinting

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- Medical examination and physician's statement of ability
- Fire safety inspections
- Home visits
- Training requirements, including pre-service and in-service requirements
- Client rights
- Agency discipline policy
- Procedures for licensure, child placement, and record keeping
- The approximate length of time to become licensed
- Agency expectations of applicants and foster parents.

This is a good time to let applicants know that the process is time consuming, lengthy, and will change their life style. Letting applicants know that the agency will be investing time and money in their training will help to assure applicants they are becoming professional members of a child welfare team program. Give the applicants time to think over the information. Schedule a second contact to address any concerns before proceeding with medicals, fingerprinting, training, and the mutual assessment process.

*(c) Mutual Assessment of the Home and the Family:*

*(1) The mutual home assessment shall be presented and recorded in such a way that other staff of the supervising agency can make use of the family as a resource for children. The assessment of the home shall indicate whether the home is in compliance with licensing standards.*

*(2) A mutual home assessment shall include a family history of applicants, including information about parents, siblings, marriages and family support systems; ability to cope with problems, stress, frustrations, crises, and loss; disciplinary methods used by the applicants' parents; personal experiences of abuse and neglect and domestic violence; criminal convictions; drug or alcohol abuse; emotional stability and maturity; ability to give and receive affection; religious orientation, if any; and educational and employment history.*

*(3) A mutual home assessment shall be made of the applicants' skills and abilities to provide care for children as set forth in [10A NCAC 70E .1104\(a\)](#).*

*(4) All members of the household shall be assessed with respect to their commitment to providing care for children.*

*(5) The foster home shall be assessed to determine if there is space to accommodate the number of children recommended for the license capacity.*

*(6) The foster home applicants shall be assessed with respect to their willingness to participate in shared parenting requirements.*

*(7) The foster home applicants shall be assessed with respect to their financial ability to provide foster care.*

There are 5 parts to the mutual home assessment:

1. Family History

The first part of the mutual home assessment is the family history. This history, which must cover each person in the foster home, may be recorded in one of two ways:

- a. The Foster Home License Application ([DSS-5016](#)) has spaces for entry of each component of the history information. The form must be completed electronically.
- b. A pre-placement assessment (adoption study) can be substituted for the Family History. In order for the pre-placement assessment to be substituted for the family history it must contain the 28 areas of a pre-placement assessment as described in [10A NCAC 70H .0405](#) and be numbered to indicate those 28 areas. If you select this option, indicate that you have done so on the [DSS-5016](#) under 'Mutual Home Assessment' and attach it after the signature page of the DSS-5016.

With either option, the family history must cover each of the following elements:

- Parentage: describe the person's parents from their first marriage to their present situation. Describe whether the applicant's parent was married more than once, how these marriages affected the applicant, and how these experiences might affect the applicant's parenting abilities. If previous marriages did not affect the applicant, state that finding in the history. For example, a history may read:

*"John's mother married for the first time in 1965 to her high school sweetheart. She gave birth to John in 1967. She divorced in 1970 and married her current husband in 1975. As far as John can tell, his mother's divorce had no negative lasting impact on him. He knows his father but is not in contact with him."*

- Siblings: list each person's siblings; give gender and date of birth. Birth order is important. Describe where each sibling resides, their marital status, and how many children they have. Describe the nature of the relationship the applicant has with siblings, nieces, and nephews. For example, a history may read:

*"John has a sister and a brother. Susan is the oldest, born August 1, 1966. She is married and has three children: two boys and a girl. John sees this family about three times a year, including at Christmas. John's brother, Dan, born February 2, 1970, is the youngest of the three. He is single, working as a computer analyst with a major company in White Plains, New York. John stays in contact with Dan via the internet and at the annual family Christmas reunion at their mother's home each year."*

- Family Support Systems: Describe how the family is supported in times of crisis and challenge. Describe on whom each person relies for advice and guidance. These people may or may not be relatives. For example, a history may read:

*“John does not rely on his family for emotional support. Although he has a good relationship with his relatives, he relies on his friend, Jacob, when he is in need. John and Jacob went to the same high school and played varsity football together. Ever since, John has relied on Jacob for emotional support. Jacob was best man at his wedding and helped John build the extension on his house. Jacob is married with children and works as an electrical contractor.”*

- Parents' Methods of Discipline: People tend to discipline as they were disciplined. Applicants need to understand this. This item should include the applicant's recollections about how he was disciplined as a child, which methods he wishes to reject, and how he will learn different methods of discipline. For example, a history may read:

*“John recalls that his step-dad would spank him with a leather belt. Before pre-service training, John felt that this approach ‘knocked some sense into him.’ Now he realizes that such methods were actually ineffective in changing his behaviors. He wishes to master the use of time out and natural consequences as methods of discipline with his own children. He says he wants more training in how to discipline more effectively.”*

- Experience with Child Abuse and Neglect and Domestic Violence: People who have unresolved issues from physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or from domestic violence often find it difficult to effectively parent children in foster care. Recording the memories of these events and their resolution is an important part of the assessment. For example, a history may read:

*“John has vague memories of his first three years when his mother was married to his father. After pre-service training, John discussed these times with his mother. Although there was no actual violence between his mother and father, they did have several loud and hurtful arguments. Once his mother shared this, John has gotten in touch with his feelings and has some understanding as to why he feels so uneasy when people yell and curse. He says such awareness is helping him parent his teenage son.”*

- Ability to Cope with Problems, Stress, Frustrations, Crises, and Loss: Describe several problems the applicant solved successfully; identify the skills the applicant used. Describe small problems and at least one major problem that affected the applicant's life. For example, a history may read:

*“John says the biggest problem he has faced was how to find a career he enjoyed. He felt trapped as a clerk working in the supermarket. He*

*solved this problem by asking Jacob what he should do. Jacob suggested night school in carpentry. John asked for his wife's support as he completed a two-year course and then worked as an apprentice carpenter. Now he owns his own shop and is successful. John's use of his skills of asking for advice and support has worked well in other areas also."*

It is crucial that applicants understand that before becoming foster parents they need to deal with any major life changing events that they have experienced the past year. These include marriages, deaths, births, changes in household composition (gaining/losing family members), loss of employment, changes in health status, etc. Applicants need to wait at least a year after any of these events occur before making an application to become a foster parent.

- Stresses and Frustrations: Applicants must be able to describe the stresses and frustrations they experience in their daily lives and how they cope with them. If applicants claim not to experience stress or frustration, they may be in denial. Help the applicant get in touch with their stresses and frustrations and describe how they cope with them. For example, a history may read,

*"John is reluctant to acknowledge that his carpentry business is stressful. He does not want to worry Sally. He worries a lot about getting business, although he has more work than he can do in a regular weekly schedule. He copes by spending a lot of extra time in the evenings marketing his business. One of his key frustrations is lack of reliable help. He currently is recruiting someone to be business manager. He states that when things really get bad, he goes fishing."*

- Crises and Loss: Children coming into care are in crisis; they are suffering loss. Separation from their birth families is a traumatic experience. To care for them, foster parents need to be aware of their own experiences with crisis and loss. Ask applicants to describe a time of crisis in their lives and how they responded. Sometimes a crisis involves a significant loss (e.g., the death of a loved one, loss of a job or a home). Help applicants identify how they grieved this loss. For example, a history may read:

*"John says that the biggest crisis in his life was the sudden death of his father. John became depressed and at times found it difficult to meet his family responsibilities and his work obligations. His work deteriorated to the point that he was about to lose his job. His supervisor referred him to their Employee Assistance Program. John received individual counseling and attended group sessions with other individuals dealing with loss. These services were instrumental in helping him cope with the loss of his father. He acquired skills that have been helpful in facing other losses. He feels that this experience will help him understand children who are experiencing grief and loss. "*

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- Criminal History: In most cases, an applicant has no criminal history. If that is the case, note so in appropriate space on the [DSS-5016](#). For example, a history may read,

“John has no known criminal history.”

In cases where there are minor infractions, list them and offer explanation. The space in item C of the [DSS-5016](#) is provided for this explanation. For example, the section under “Local Court Record, Findings and Dates” may read:

“08/03/1982 *Driving without license*; 06/12/1985 *Reckless Driving*;  
05/23/1988 *public intoxication*. “

Explanation of Findings may read:

*“In 1982, John drove the family car around the block just to see if could do it. A patrol officer who knew him to be under age gave him a ticket. In 1985, he was cited for driving 15 miles over the speed limit. In 1988 John’s attention was distracted while driving around with some friends. He failed to see a stop sign and caused a minor accident. John says he learned from these infractions to obey traffic laws and the accident awakened him to the potential harm that can be brought about by not being alert and conscientious when driving.”*

- Experience with Alcohol or Drug Abuse: People who have a problem with alcohol should not care for children. Alcoholism is a disease that affects judgment, perception, and attention. In some stages of the disease, the person is unresponsive or passes out. Since alcohol is a legal drug, it is important to make sure that the applicant is responsible in its use.

If the applicant uses alcohol, explore in detail how he or she handles its use so that it does not interfere with the care of children. For example, the applicant may restrict usage to a glass of wine at dinner. Maybe alcohol is consumed only when at least one other responsible adult is present and not drinking. The applicant may go out with friends to a sports bar and one member of the group serves as a designated driver. Be specific and detailed with this item. Many children come from families where alcohol is abused and where alcohol abuse contributed to the child being placed in foster care.

Many forms of drugs used for recreation are illegal. A home where illegal drugs are present is not a safe home. If the applicant has used such substances in the past, carefully document that usage. Also, document why you are convinced the applicant no longer uses illegal drugs.

Some prescribed medications can be abused. If the applicant uses tranquilizers, antidepressants or pain medication, explore how these medications are used. If in doubt about the applicant’s ability to handle any mood altering substance, legal or illegal, consult with the applicant’s physician. Make sure your narrative is

specific and detailed on this topic. If the applicant does not use mood-altering drugs, say so in the narrative. For example, the history may read:

*“John does not use any mood altering drugs such as alcohol, medications or illegal substances.”* If the applicant has used such substances, explain in detail. For example, a history may read: *“John acknowledges he was a heavy drinker in his youth. Now he drinks in moderation. He likes to have a couple of beers while watching Sunday NFL football games. Sally does not participate so she can be available for the children. John likes to go to a sports bar for the Super Bowl. Since he may consume alcoholic beverages at that event, he goes and comes home by taxicab or with a designated driver. John says he did try marijuana while in the service. Since marijuana is illegal, he says he no longer smokes it. He says he is on no mood altering medications.”*

- Educational and Employment History: List each of the diplomas, degrees, and certifications earned by the applicant. If the applicant started a level of study and did not finish, note this in the narrative. List each job held by the applicant, with beginning dates and ending dates. Of particular importance are any unusual accomplishments or issues in the applicant’s work history. If the applicant excelled in a subject, list that. If the applicant struggles, document that also. If the applicant did well in a job, note the accomplishment. If the applicant was dismissed from a job, note the reason and the applicant’s reactions. The intention here is to present the pattern of efforts and accomplishments. For example, a history may read:

*“John graduated high school in 1985. He says he loved shop and wood working classes and hated English grammar classes. He enrolled at the local community college but dropped out after three semesters. He did not like freshman English and thought that freshman civics was a waste of time. He joined the US Army and served for four years. After discharge in 1990, he went back to community college majoring in business. He attended night school and graduated with an associate’s degree in 1992. He studied carpentry and earned a master builders certificate in 1994. He worked as an assistant carpenter with Dubois Construction Company from 1993 to 1996. When offered a management job, he decided to open his own company. Excel Carpentry began in 1997 with one small shop and one employee. It now has operations in five locations and employs eight carpenters. John owns the company.”*

- Religious Orientation: A religious orientation is not a requirement for licensure as a foster parent. Applicants may or may not have religious preferences or expectations for themselves. However, it is important to explore this subject with applicants to determine their religious expectations for children placed in their home. How do they celebrate/express their faith? How will they react to a child who has a different faith? How will they react to a child that has no religious training and does not want to attend religious services? For example, a history may read:

*“John and Sally are very active in a church and serve on various committees and teach a Sunday school class. Church is very important to them and they expect to offer any child the opportunity to attend. They recognize they may be asked to help a child in their home celebrate another faith. They are willing to do this. However, they do acknowledge that it may be difficult to provide foster care for a child who refuses to attend religious services or whose parents refuse to let the child attend religious services.”*

- Marriages: List the dates of each of the applicant’s marriages or significant relationships. If any ended in divorce or termination, describe any unresolved issues that may affect the present family. If there are no unresolved issues, state this in the narrative. Unresolved issues may include continued acrimonious contact with the former spouse or partner, unresolved financial issues with the ex-spouse or partner, or children from the marriage or relationship in custody of the ex-spouse or ex-partner. For example, a history may read:

*“John and Sally married in 1997. They have a strong marriage and teach a class on Christian marriage at their church. John was married previously in 1994 and divorced in 1995. From this marriage, he has a son. His son and his ex-spouse live in Kansas. John sees his son every summer when he comes to visit for a week at the beach. Sally was married before in 1990 and divorced the following year. There are no unresolved issues from her first marriage.”*

- Parenting Experiences: When the applicants have raised their own family they will have a history to draw from. They will be able to share information about their parenting styles, what they learned from their own parenting experiences, what they would do differently in retrospect. They will be able to talk about the joys and trials of parenting their own children. Similarly they may have parented as a stepparent or in another role where they had full time care for children for a period of time. This will be invaluable information in assessing the abilities of the family and identifying areas where the family will need further education and support. If they are not parents, describe any important relationships with relative children or children in youth groups, scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, etc.
- Emotional Stability and Maturity: Children need a stable and mature home. If the applicant is subject to mood swings, has emotional outbursts, or makes impulsive decisions, the home atmosphere may be too turbulent. This item requires the licensing social worker to use professional observation skills. Is the applicant aware of his feelings, especially under stress? Does the applicant pause and think when he gets upset? Does the applicant acknowledge his needs and arrange to get those needs met in a harmonious way? For this element, the candid opinion of people who know the applicant can help. This is a good place to make use of references. Document how you know that the applicant is emotionally stable and mature. For example, a history may read:

*“John is in touch with his feelings. During one session in my office, he said, ‘Hey, this is feeling like an interrogation. I am feeling a little uncomfortable.’ When asked what would help him feel more secure, he replied, ‘Well, assure me that this information will be kept between you and me.’ Later I observed John with his daughter who was pestering him for money. He paused the conversation, turned to his daughter, and said, ‘I am talking now. When I get through, I will listen to your request. Please be patient for a few more minutes.’”*

Other indicators of emotional stability and maturity are things like the longevity of a marriage, the applicant’s job history with job changes, which were promotions or career advancements, volunteer activities, etc.

- Ability to Give and Receive Affection: Foster parents model how adults interact. How family members treat each other impacts children in their care. Many children in foster care have been touched in abusive ways. Foster parents need to be aware of this and comfortable using touch in meaningful ways. Document how the applicant uses touch. Be specific. Also, share how the person responds to touch. For example, the history may read:

*“While talking with his daughter about her request for money, John held his daughter’s hand. It seemed this was signal between them that she had his attention. After the discussion, she hugged him. On another occasion, I observed John and Sally holding hands while waiting in the lobby. Once during a meeting with the two of them, John got very sad and started to tear up. He readily accepted his wife putting her hand to his cheek.”*

Preparing a good social history takes time and effort. Some writers prepare a genogram to guide their narrative. Others use a chart listing each family member and each of the items listed above. The Family Profile is a tool completed by the family in their own words, addressing these topics and is a resource for the worker compiling the social history. The Family Profile is usually given to the prospective family at one of the group training sessions and then returned to the worker before the end of the group sessions. Make sure the narrative provides answers a reader may have about the family.

## 2. An Assessment of the Twelve Skills of Foster Parenting

The second part of the mutual assessment is a description of how well the applicant(s) use each of the twelve skills of foster parenting. These skills are described in detail in the Standards for Licensing, Rule Section [10A NCAC 70E .1104](#). Describe the applicant’s strengths and needs related to each of the 12 skills using the [DSS-5016](#). There is space on the form to enter information electronically.

Keep all twelve skills in mind as you observe the applicants as they participate in pre-service training, and as they interact as a family. Observe the family interacting

and gather information from different perspectives. Consider asking the family to do one of the following during a home visit:

- Discuss becoming a foster family
- If the family already has children, play a game or engage in some other activity they enjoy
- Discuss how other family members, friends, and neighbors feel about their decision to become foster parents

It can also be instructive to stop by during a mealtime, possibly on your way home from work to deliver something to the family. It is important to see things in real time, rather than just relying on self-report.

Below are listed suggestions and ideas about how to write descriptions of the twelve skills. To help you with this task we will consider the example of Ms. Smith, who has two children: Jenny, age 7, and Timmy, age 9.

a. The 12 Skills of Foster Parenting:

- Skill 1: Assess and build on individual and family strengths and needs
- Skill 3: Identify the strengths and needs of children placed in the home
- Skill 4: Build on children's strengths and meet the needs of children placed in the home
- Skill 7: Help children placed in the home manage their behaviors

These skills build on one another. Skill 1 is a self-assessment. An individual must be able to self assess before assessing others. Practicing this skill requires identifying personal and family attributes and classifying them as strengths or needs. These strengths and needs then are evaluated according to their value in caring for children. Once applicants are able to assess themselves and other family members (skill 1) they will be ready to identify the strengths and needs of children placed with them (skill 3). Once a child's strengths and needs are identified that knowledge should direct productive interactions with the child. Skill 4 uses the knowledge gained by skill 3 to develop a plan of action. Skill 7 is applied by building on the child's strengths and meeting the child's needs to help the child to manage behaviors useful to the child and the family. To illustrate this set of skills, consider the example involving Ms. Smith. The licensing social worker can ask Ms. Smith:

- "How would you describe the members of your family, both their strengths and areas where they need help?"
- "What kinds of things help Jenny when she has a hard time listening?"
- "You mentioned Timmy is very musical. Is he involved in any kind of musical activities?"
- "Timmy seemed to get frustrated during the game. Can you tell me about that?"

Based on observations, how does Ms. Smith intervene when there are conflicts among family or group members? Does she anticipate when someone might have a hard time or need help? Does she acknowledge when someone does a good job or helps out? Does she set limits firmly and consistently? Does she assign roles and responsibility fairly?

The assessment may read:

*“Ms. Smith was/was not able to describe strengths and needs, and demonstrated/did not demonstrate an ability to build on or address them. She showed/did not show an ability to help children manage their behavior.”*

Give specific examples, such as:

*“Ms. Smith was able to help her children manage conflicts while playing a game, and in private she was able to list the strengths and needs of each of her children. For example, she said that Timmy takes music lessons to develop this talent, but he sometimes needs help talking things out rather than fighting or yelling.”*

To Assess the Following Parenting Skills:

- Skill 2: Use and develop effective communication
- Skill 5: Develop partnerships with children placed in the home, birth family, the agency, and the community to develop and carry out plans for permanency

To illustrate this set of skills, let's look at the example. The licensing social worker can ask Ms. Smith:

- What church or community activities are you involved in?
- What kinds of things do you do at your job?
- Please tell me about a time when you had a problem or conflict at work. How did you resolve it?
- What suggestions do you have for how the pre-service training can be more helpful?
- What were your most favorite and least favorite parts of the training?

The licensing social worker can use the following questions to guide her observations of Ms. Smith:

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- How does Ms. Smith communicate questions and concerns in one-on-one and group settings?
- Is she able to give negative feedback and admit when she doesn't know something?
- Is she able to ask for help?
- Does she explain ground rules or expectations to her family?

Based on Ms. Smith's responses and the licensing social worker's observations, the assessment may read:

*"Ms. Smith does/does not communicate effectively and develop successful partnerships."*

Give specific examples to support this statement, such as:

*"Ms. Smith is a deacon in her church and teaches Sunday school. Ms. Smith is a store manager who leads team meetings and supervises five employees. Ms. Smith was an active member of the pre-service group who asked appropriate questions at the right time and listened to others. Even when someone is saying something with which she strongly disagrees, she listens attentively, paraphrases the comments back to person to their satisfaction and makes sure she heard correctly. After that, she often will say 'well, I don't agree,'" and explain the reasons for her opinion.*

To Assess the Following Skill

- Skill 6: Help children placed in the home develop skills to manage loss and form attachments

It is helpful if the applicant has had personal experience dealing with losses and forming attachments. Ask the applicants to remember a time when they lost a loved one, went through a divorce, lost a job, or friendship. If they have not had these experiences ask them to recall a friend or someone who did experience such losses. Ask the applicant to share their personal experience; ask how this experience can help a child coming into care. To illustrate this set of skills, let's look at the example. The licensing social worker can ask Ms. Smith:

- Children coming into foster care have experienced many painful losses. Have you ever lost anyone close to you?
- How did you deal with the loss and the anger that followed?
- What helped you during that time?

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- What did you learn from the experience that might be helpful to a child experiencing her own loss?
- Once you had gotten through the hardest part of your grief, were there certain things that would trigger renewed grief reactions for you?
- What would it be like for you to have a child in your home that might be too wounded to thank you or show any appreciation for what you're doing?
- What do you think it would be like to have a child return home after being part of your family?

The licensing social worker can use the following questions to guide her observations of Ms. Smith:

- How does Ms. Smith help family or group members manage frustration or disappointment?
- How does she show affection or give positive feedback?
- How does Ms. Smith respond to a person in denial, in anger, in bargaining, in depression due to grief?
- How does Ms. Smith acknowledge a person has reached the acceptance phase?

Based on Ms. Smith's responses and the licensing social worker's observations, the assessment may read:

*"Ms. Smith does/does not have experience coping with loss and helping other people cope with loss."*

To support this statement you might say,

*"Ms. Smith lost her grandmother, who helped to raise her, five years ago. She describes her faith and her family as major supports in coping with the loss. She said the hardest phase of grieving was the depression stage. She says she knows it takes time to get over feeling depressed, and she says she will help a child when he or she goes through that phase."*

To Assess the Following Skills

- Skill 8: Help children placed in the home maintain and develop relationships that keep them connected to their pasts

- Skill 9: Help children placed in the home build on positive self-concept and positive family, cultural and racial identity

These skills attempt to ensure children in foster care maintain contact with their families, culture, and background. Applicants demonstrate these skills by planning and encouraging contacts with birth family members, engaging in shared parenting, and by asking children how they celebrate holidays and incorporating their ideas and traditions into foster family events. Applicants also demonstrate these skills when they maintain contact with their own extended families, and when they display photographs of family members. Applicants who possess Skill 9 are curious about other cultures and enjoy learning and sharing different ways people do things. They are open to differences and enjoy sharing them. To illustrate this set of skills, let's look at the example. The licensing social worker can ask Ms. Smith:

- What do you do to keep in touch with family and friends who live in other places?
- What cultural or religious groups do you belong to?
- Please tell me about your family's special family or cultural traditions.
- Please show me the photo albums or scrapbooks you keep for your children.

Based on Ms. Smith's responses and the licensing social worker's observations, the assessment may read:

*"Ms. Smith expresses/does not express an understanding of the importance of maintaining attachments and family and cultural identity."*

To support this, give examples, such as,

*"Ms. Smith is close to her sister, who has adopted two children from Vietnam. She supports her sister's efforts to keep her adopted niece and nephew connected to their culture of origin by celebrating Vietnamese New Year with them and by preparing Vietnamese food for them. One summer she attended Vietnamese culture camp with them."*

To Assess the Following Skill

- Skill 10: Provide a safe and healthy environment for children placed in the home, which keeps them free from harm.

Many children in foster care are used to exploring and going where they wish. A skilled foster parent will see the home and its exterior spaces through the eyes of a child. Applicants show mastery of this skill by taking the initiative to change their homes to make them safe, healthy, and "kid friendly." Skilled applicants do

not presume that the way they raised their own child will be appropriately safe and healthy for children coming into care. Applicants who have not had children may have to do homework, research, and self-education on what is appropriate for children of different ages. Experiences that contribute to mastery of this skill include volunteering at the church nursery, coaching youth sports, and babysitting. To illustrate this skill, let's look at an example. The licensing social worker can ask Ms. Smith:

- Let's walk around the house and identify any areas that might be unsafe for small children. What adjustments did you have to make for your own children when they were young?
- Who are the regular doctors and dentist for your family?
- What would you do if a child became unconscious?
- Who would you call?
- What is the number?

The licensing social worker can use the following questions to guide her observations of Ms. Smith's mastery of this skill:

- Is Ms. Smith able to identify potential hazards or risks around her home and yard?
- Once identified, does she make changes over time to correct them, or does she minimize risks, express reluctance, or procrastinate?
- Do she and her family have a history of regular preventive health care or of managing chronic illnesses?
- Is the yard kept clear of all standing water to prevent breeding of mosquitoes?
- If she has a dog or cat, how are pet droppings handled and eliminated?

Based on Ms. Smith's responses and the licensing social worker's observations, the assessment may read:

*"Ms. Smith has/has not created a safe and healthy environment in her home and is/is not willing to make changes as needed to ensure safety."*

You might support this assertion by noting

*"Ms. Smith has placed potentially harmful household chemicals in locked cabinets, upgraded her smoke detectors, and made other safety-related changes. What's more, she converted a spare room into a "rainy day"*

*room stocked with books, puzzles, and age-appropriate games so that Timmy and Jenny have a place to play during inclement weather.”*

To Assess the Following Skills:

- Skill 11: Assess the ways in which providing family foster or therapeutic foster care affects the family
- Skill 12: Make an informed decision whether to provide family foster or therapeutic foster care

These skills summarize the first ten skills. The licensing social worker can observe these skills in action as the applicant seeks information about children needing placement, comments on the readiness of the home, and uses a structured decision making model. The applicant who possesses these skills can describe how a decision was made as well as the decision itself. To illustrate these skills, let's look at the example. The licensing social worker can ask Ms. Smith: How will providing foster care services affect your family?

- What do your family members think?
- How do you know?
- Have you discussed this with any of your neighbors?
- What do they think?
- Have you done any reading or spoken with anyone else who has provided foster care?

The licensing social worker can use the following questions to guide her observations of Ms. Smith's mastery of these skills:

- How does Ms. Smith explain fostering and the difference it will make to her children?
- Has she given her family members a chance to express their concerns?
- Does she seem realistic in her expectations?
- Can she describe the challenges her family faces in taking in children?

Based on Ms. Smith's responses and the licensing social worker's observations, the assessment may read:

*“Ms. Smith has/has not assessed the ways fostering will impact her family and is/is not making an informed decision.”*

Give concrete, specific examples to support this conclusion, such as

*“Ms. Smith realizes that her family will have to spend more time in meetings and taking children to medical appointments.”*

The mutual home assessment is not biography or autobiography. It is a joint effort between the licensing social worker and the applicant. The writing may take several drafts as the applicant reviews what is written and adds corrections or clarifications.

b. Guidelines and Suggestions:

- For each skill, present a general conclusion followed by examples that provide supporting evidence. For example, for Skill 9 the general conclusion may read:

*“Ms. Smith expresses an understanding of the importance of maintaining attachments and family and cultural identity.”*

Then follow with specific examples to support the general conclusion:

*“Ms. Smith supports her sister’s efforts to keep her adopted niece and nephew connected to their culture of origin by celebrating Vietnamese New Year with them and by preparing Vietnamese food”.*

- Supporting examples should avoid affective/cognitive terms such as “understands,” “knows,” “feels,” and “appreciates.” Instead, support conclusions by describing the applicant’s specific behaviors or the words that she used. For example, you might write:

*“Ms. Smith, who lost her grandmother five years ago, says she recovered from the loss through prayer, increased involvement in her church, and by spending additional time in her garden.”*

- Remember that applicants can demonstrate the twelve skills in ways that don’t involve children, such as in their job, volunteer work, or hobbies. Many foster parents say the twelve skills are just good life skills and can be applied in a variety of situations.
- There are two other important sources of information to help assess applicants’ skills. The first is foster parent pre-service training MAPP/GPS. Foster parents complete the strengths/needs worksheets for every week of MAPP/GPS. Group leaders are also encouraged to do meeting notes during MAPP/GPS. Both these items should be in the parent’s MAPP/GPS portfolio and should be used as a foundation to build on for further discussion and clarification. Even if you are not teaching your applicants’ particular class, collaborate with the teacher so

you can follow up with families on concerns they identify for themselves as they learn about the twelve skills.

(5) The foster home shall be assessed to determine if there is space to accommodate the number of children recommended for the license capacity.

### 3. The Home

The fourth part of the mutual home assessment is a description of the foster home itself. Make sure there is sleeping and living space to accommodate the capacity (number of children) recommended for the license. Carefully review the exterior and interior, taking note of any dangers or concerns that can harm children. After walking through the house and grounds, complete the Foster Home Environmental Conditions Report ([DSS-5150](#)) and the appropriate part of the [DSS-5016](#). On the [DSS-5016](#), identify the space for each child. Make sure all relevant questions are answered and explanations provided on the [DSS-5016](#).

(6) The foster home applicants shall be assessed with respect to their willingness to participate in shared parenting requirements.

### 4. Shared Parenting

The fifth part of the mutual home assessment describes the applicant's willingness to participate in shared parenting. In Shared Parenting, the applicant will have contact and dealings with parents who have done hurtful things to their children. Applicants may have difficulty understanding the behaviors and attitudes of some birth parents. Alternatively, the applicant's values may clash with the birth parent's values. To address the issue of Shared Parenting, applicants should use the first of the twelve parenting skills, articulating their strengths and needs around working with a child's birth parents. Shared Parenting is hard emotionally and demands a lot of time. Shared Parenting is an example of a possible need and an area for development by foster parents. The supervising agency must be willing to assist new foster parents with increasing skills in this area. It is helpful for foster parents to become aware that there are ways to practice Shared Parenting that do not involve having face-to-face contact with birth parents (such as sending the child's school work to visits, talking with the birth parents on the phone, having a picture of the birth parent in the child's rooms, etc.). It may be helpful if new foster parents meet experienced foster parents who practice Shared Parenting. You may need to remind foster parents of this commitment after they are licensed and actually involved with birth parents.

Document the applicants' willingness to participate in Shared Parenting on the [DSS-5016](#). As much as possible, use the applicant's actual words. Other sources of information for this part of the assessment are the pre-service trainer and comments made in pre service training. Over the course of the class many applicants become more receptive to working with birth parents and other agency personnel.

(7) The foster home applicants shall be assessed with respect to their financial ability to provide foster care.

### 5. Financial Ability

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To be licensed as a foster family, the applicant's home must be financially stable and secure. Income in a foster home must cover the bills. Foster care payments are not to be used for basic household expenses. Some sources of income are not stable and are temporary. Unemployment compensation, worker's compensation, other injury related payments, college scholarships, stipends and loans, GI Bill, Work First benefits, etc. are not counted in establishing the household's income. Other forms of income such as social security payments, pensions, railroad retirement payments, annuity payments, or any other ongoing income may be counted. The objective is to show that the household is able to meet its financial needs without providing foster care services.

On the [DSS-5016](#) under income, list each source and amount of monthly income, then add them up for a total. For example, an entry may read:

*"Mr. Smith wages=\$1600; Ms. Smith wages=\$1200; social security child Sam=\$650; Total monthly income=\$3450."*

Next, check the appropriate boxes for expenses covered. Indicate whether child support is being paid for a child not in the home. Indicate whether the support is current or in arrears. If in arrears, give amount and provide an explanation. For example,

*"Arrearage \$4,768 in addition to monthly amount of \$750 per court order, Mr. Smith pays an additional \$250 on this arrearage and expects to be current in three months." In space provided, list any other major expenses. For example, "Other bills include \$350 of credit card debt, \$200 to college fund, \$150 boat payment, \$150 on back medical bill for Ms. Smith's operation three years ago. She had elective surgery not covered by insurance."*

Some foster parents will experience the loss of a job and income while providing foster care services. Children should not be moved simply because foster parents experience loss of job. However, it is an expectation, that the supervising agency will be more present and supportive in the family's life, and that no additional children will be placed in the home. In addition, once any foster child leaves the home, other foster children should not be placed in the home until the foster parent(s) is employed and has sufficient income to meet their needs without the foster care stipend.

D. [10A NCAC 70E .0804](#) USE OF REFERENCES

*References shall be used to supplement the information obtained through interviews and observation regarding the applicants. All adult members of the foster home shall provide three references to the supervising agency.*

All adult members of the foster home must provide three references (e.g., employer, pastor, neighbor, etc.). Interview these people as part of the assessment process. Use references wisely by following the same format of the twelve skills. References might be able to give specific examples of an applicant exhibiting the skills: How does Ms. Smith

let her boss know when she is having a problem? How does Ms. Smith get along with other folks in the neighborhood? Do you know of any times when Ms. Smith helped someone or helped solve a problem in the community? What kinds of things does Ms. Smith do for your church family? A good reference adds to the picture the assessment is creating.

E. [10A NCAC 70E .0805](#) PERIODIC REASSESSMENT OF HOME

*(a) A foster home shall be reassessed at least biennially.*

*(b) Reassessment shall include a mutual assessment with the foster parents of their skills and abilities to provide care for children, including ways in which they have been able to meet the needs of children placed in their home and areas in which they need further development.*

*(c) Any changes in physical set up and in the foster parents' capacities for providing foster care since the original home assessment or previous reassessments shall be documented in the family's record.*

*(d) Reassessment shall be used as a tool for relicensing the home.*

Updating the mutual home assessment is part of the relicensing requirements. At a minimum, go over the previous mutual home assessment information with the applicants as part of the relicensure process. An update of the twelve parenting skills is very important. Take time to go over each of the twelve skills. The foster parents should see growth and progress in mastery of these twelve skills. As their strengths improve, foster parents often see other needs they wish to address. Of course, the reassessment includes another examination of the physical space and an update to the social history information.

F. [10A NCAC 70E .0806](#) AGENCY FOSTER PARENT AGREEMENT

*The supervising agency foster parents agreement, defining each party's rights and obligations shall be reviewed and signed by the foster parents and the licensing worker at the time of the initial licensing and no less than biennially thereafter.*

A productive working relationship between the foster family and the supervising agency is one of the best indicators of a successful placement for a child in care. If the agency and the foster family do not work well together, the child suffers. The Agency Foster/Parents' Agreement ([DSS-1796](#)) or its equivalent must be reviewed with the foster parents at least every two years. This document outlines the minimum expectations for the agency and the foster parents to have a productive working relationship. Guidance about completing the Agency/Foster Parents' Agreement ([DSS-1796](#)) is found in Section .0900 | Forms of this manual.