

CONNECT FOR KIDS REACHES FAMILIES OVER THE WEB

Connect for Kids – a vibrant, innovative and “virtual” nonprofit organization – is the new “home” for the National Foster Care Coalition. Recently spun off from the Benton Foundation as an independent entity, Connect for Kids is housed in the nation’s capital but lives on the worldwide web at www.connectforkids.com.

Its trendy website is designed to make a better world for children by providing an “information community” for people who care about kids. A recent visit to connectforkids.org revealed articles on kids selling organic produce at a Michigan farmers market, the effect of block grants on families, results from a poll about hot lunches, and tips about how to help children with science fair projects.

“The mission of Connect for Kids has always been to use the Internet to create better communities for families,” says Cecilia Garcia, Connect for Kids executive director. Connect for Kids began in 1996 when the Benton Foundation and the Advertising Council launched an initiative to increase the impact of public service advertising through the Internet. The Advertising Council, which was in the midst of a 10-year commitment to children’s issues, collaborated with the Benton Foundation because of their commitment to children’s issues and to using technology in the public interest.

“Very quickly it became clear that the site could do much more than public service advertising,” said Garcia. “We changed the original idea and began posting more articles because we saw we could use this exciting technology to provide much more depth. These articles became our weekly newsletter.” This newsletter had 300 subscribers to its first issue. Now there are 40,000 subscribers and an estimated 120,000 people who view each issue.

“Connect for Kids was created on the Internet and thrives on the Internet. Our understanding and use of communications technology makes us fundamentally different,” continues Garcia. “Connect for Kids would not exist as a printed piece. We are always focused on what we are saying, how we are saying it, and what the end result will be. We want to inform people and then move them to take action.”

Connect for Kids has an important connection to Casey Family Services through their role as administrator of the National Foster Care Coalition. “Foster care has been a priority for us since we worked with Casey Family Programs on *Take This Heart*,” says Garcia. “We want to bring attention to the Coalition and this incredibly important issue. People don’t realize the impact of foster care unless they are directly involved.”

There is also a strong Casey connection through the Celebrating Families (celebratingfamilies.org) part of the website, which is underwritten by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This site provides journalists, educators and others with ideas and information for positive stories about children and families. This month, 31 celebrations are listed, everything from National Young Readers Day to National Family Week. For each listing, Celebrating Families provides information about the history of the celebration and sources for more information. For example, November 13 is World Kindness Day. Celebrating Families describes the origins of this celebration and how it came into being.

Celebrating Families has been very popular. Shortly after it was launched, 45 organizations linked to the site. “We want to do even more with the site: reach more

journalists and provide more information. We are also trying to get into the classrooms,” says Garcia.

The Foundation also sponsors Connect for Kids’ communication initiatives around welfare reform and the impact of the federal budget at the state and local level. “Casey has really been a leader in this area and has helped to involve other leading foundations,” says Garcia. “Organizations say they would never have taken on this communication challenge without this program. This gave them the language that allowed their messages to resonate with policymakers and the public.”

Garcia and her staff of five take all this activity in stride. “This – along with publishing weekly – is what Connect for Kids is all about,” she says simply.

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