



Foster Parenting:
Open Homes,
Open Hearts



By Sam Gaines

It's a reality that faces some 800,000 American children a year: their home environment is no longer safe or appropriate for their own well-being. A child welfare caseworker gets called in to see if the reports of abuse or neglect are legitimate. A therapist and pediatrician enter the picture to examine the child. If there is sufficient reason for concern regarding the health and/or safety of the child, a court will rule that the child be temporarily removed from the home.

So where does this child go from here?

In many cases, to a foster family. Foster parents are trained, dedicated volunteers who have decided to open their homes and families to a child in need for as long as the courts deem it necessary. The goal is always to reunite the child with his original family, if possible.

In the meantime, though, the foster family is home for a child in need. And the difference foster parents can make in the life of a child is overwhelmingly positive.

Years ago, a U.S. Marines' recruiting commercial featured the slogan, **"The toughest job you'll ever love."** The same might be said of foster parenting.

Who Is a Foster Parent?

There is no single "type" of person who becomes a foster parent. Some foster parents are married couples with their own children. Others are single or divorced people without any children of their own. Some are young adults; others are older adults with adult children who no longer live in the home.

Regardless, foster parents have been vetted through the agency that manages the foster care process where they live. Typically, this includes a thorough background check and often a home inspection to make sure the potential foster parent can provide the warm, safe, nurturing home a child in foster care (and any child, for that matter) needs. It also includes hands-on training to prepare the foster parent for the responsibilities and challenges of providing foster care.

Above all, foster parents are extraordinary individuals and couples who have made the commitment to share their homes with children who need a safe place to stay, and to do so for as long as is needed.

"Being a foster parent is like getting married or having children of your own — it's a major life event," says Moira Szilagyi, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, medical director of foster care pediatrics for Starlight Pediatrics in Rochester, N.Y. "You're choosing to take on other people's children in a way that touches your own family. It requires a huge level of commitment."

Weighing the Decision

Making the decision to become a foster parent is not easy. "People should really deeply consider why they want to become foster care parents, what their motivations are," says Dr. Szilagyi, who serves as co-chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Task Force on Foster Care. "There are all sorts of good reasons for making this commitment, but it's important that you be clear with yourself about what your motivation is, because at some point, it's going to get tough and you'll need to remind yourself why you made this decision."

Dr. Szilagyi says that a family conversation is a critical step. "Everyone needs to be on board with this decision," she says.

Making the decision to provide foster care means accepting the challenges that come along with it, says Linda D. Sagor, M.D., MPH, FAAP, founder and director of the Foster Children Evaluation Services (FaCES) Clinic at UMass Memorial Health Care in Worcester, Mass. "Are you ready to provide a ready, warm, loving, nurturing home for these kids?" she asks. "And can you do that while realizing these children may not always be able to give back to you, at least not initially. They may need to relearn what it means to be comforted and loved in an appropriate way."

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A Child at Your Door

It's one of those profound moments foster parents never forget: the day (or night) the child shows up on their doorstep, typically with the social worker at her side. What then?

"Probably the best single approach is to be calm and welcoming to the child as you explain who you are, why the child is here at this new home, and why it's a temporary situation," Dr. Szilagyi says. "Make it clear that you're glad the child is here in your home, and it's your job to keep her safe and take care of her for as long as she's here."

Dr. Szilagyi says a tour of the home is a good idea, including all family members and the room where the child will live. "Kids in foster care are often in a state of shock," she says. "Anything you can do to help ease the child through this difficult situation is a good thing. Remember, any child would prefer to be at home with their birth parents, even if that's not possible. It's only natural."

Between Two Homes

As a child in foster care gets settled into what is hoped will be a temporary situation, many questions will naturally come up. "The number one thing, from what I've seen, is talking to the kids at a level appropriate to their age about what is going to happen in this process," says Dr. Sagor, who is also division director of general pediatrics for UMass Memorial Health Care, and a member of the AAP task force. "Don't push it too hard or try to tell them too much, and be as honest as you can."

For children in foster care, visits with the original home are frequently part of the process. That, too, can be tough for a child. "It's really important to establish threads of continuity for the child," Dr. Sagor says. "So many things are new to the child — new family, new neighbors, probably a new school, too. Anything that can help build a sense of stability for the child is potentially very helpful." Dr. Sagor recommends using objects of affection, such as stuffed animals, as well as familiar rituals and practices, to give the child a sense of well-being. "It can help remind the child that there are people in her life who love her and care about her."

When the child returns from a parental visit, tough emotions can be a factor. "That 'reentry period' can be a very important part of these transitions," says Dr. Szilagyi. "That's why it's important to maintain that calm demeanor and be there for the child. Give the child the space he needs to talk about the emotions, to the extent he's comfortable."

Going Back Home — or Staying Put

An even bigger transition occurs for the child in foster care — and for both the birth and foster families, too — if and when the court decides it's time for the child to return home. This typically occurs when the birth parent or parents have met the goals set by the courts, with input from the social worker and health care professionals involved.

There's nothing easy about parting with a child you've welcomed into your home and hearts, Dr. Sagor says. But it's important to be honest and open about what's happening. "Ideally, there is already a good relationship between the foster family and the birth family," she says. "That can go a long way to keeping the child's sense of continuity and well-being strong."

Ultimately, this is what being a foster parent is about. "Your role as a foster parent is really to care for this child and help the child make the transition back home, since 60 percent go back to their birth families," says Dr. Szilagyi.

Beyond Foster Parenting

Not everyone can be a foster parent, but many people who can't foster can still play an enormously important role in the life of a child in foster care by volunteering.

There are many roles for a volunteer in the life of a child in foster care. Most states have a court-appointed special advocate (CASA), guardian ad litem (GAL), or similar programs where adults represent the interests of the children in legal proceedings. These important volunteers often serve as the bridge between the child welfare department, court officials, health care professionals, and parents and foster parents, ensuring that the children's needs are being met every step of the way.

But there are many other opportunities available, as well. Children in foster care need:

- Tutoring
- Friendship (through a big brother/big sister program)
- Coaching and instruction
- Mentoring in life skills development (e.g., learning to use a checking account, renting an apartment, college preparation, etc.)
- Donated school supplies, clothes

"Really, there's a vast need here," says Dr. Szilagyi. "Even if it's just an hour a month, time spent with a child in foster care provides important mentoring and support."

About 20 percent of children in foster care are eventually adopted, either by relatives of the birth family (who may also be the child's foster family) or (more commonly) by the non-related foster parents who have been providing foster care for the child. The decision to adopt represents an even deeper commitment, of course, and is one that must be weighed carefully.

Whether it's for a few nights, a few years, or the rest of the child's pre-adult life, a foster parent can make all the difference in the world to a child in need. ●