

What Foster Parents Wish Other Parents Knew

1. **We're not Saints.** We do this because it needs doing, we love kids and this is our thing. Some of us hope to expand our families this way, some of us do it for the pleasure of hearing the laughter of young voices, some of us are called to action by the children of family or friends needing care, some of us grew up around formal or informal fostering - but all of us are doing it for our own reasons: **because we love it and/or love the kids.** We are the lucky ones - we get to have these great kids in our lives.

We hate being told we must be saints or angels because we're doing something really ordinary and normal: taking care of kids in need. The idea of sainthood makes it impossible for ordinary people to do this - and the truth is the world needs more ordinary, human foster parents. It's a double-edged sword because if we're saints and angels, we can't ever be jerks, or human, or need help, and sometimes this is hard.

2. **WATCH WHAT YOU SAY AROUND THE KIDS!!!!!!** This cannot be emphasized enough. Everyone is continually stunned by the things people will ask within hearing distance of children: "Is their mom an addict?" or "Well, they aren't your REAL kids are they" or "Are you going to adopt them?" Not only is that information private, but it is horrible for the kids to hear people speculating about their future or the family members they love.

3. **Don't act surprised that they are nice, smart, loving, well-behaved kids.** There tends to be an implied assumption that foster kids are flawed and we must be saints because no one else would take these damaged, horrible kids. Kids in foster care have endured a lot of trauma, and sometimes that does come with behavioral challenges, but many of the brightest, nicest, best behaved, kindest and most loving children are foster kids.

4. **Don't disrespect their parents.** No one chooses to be born mentally ill or developmentally delayed, or gets addicted to drugs on purpose. It's not their fault if they didn't live in a stable family situation that they could replicate. Abusive and neglectful parents often love their kids and do the best they can, and a lot of them can do better if they get help and support. Birth and Foster parents often work really hard to have positive relationships with each other.

5. **The kids are not indebted to us, and it is crazy to expect them to be, or to feel lucky that they are with us.** They were taken from everything they knew and had to give up parents, siblings, pets, extended family, neighborhood, toys, and everything else that was normal to them. No one asked them whether they wanted to come into care. You have complex feelings and ambivalence about a lot of things, even if it seems like those things are good for you or for the best.

6. **No, we're not making any money on it.** Foster families don't get paid but they do get a portion of the child's expenses reimbursed. That money is only for the child and does not cover all of the expenses of caring for the child. Saying anything about money in front of the kids is very hurtful to them. Kids who are being loved and learning to trust now think that you are only doing this because of the money.

7. **Yes, it's tough to give the kids back to their parents or to extended family.** Letting kids go is really hard, but someone has to do it. Not all kids in care come from irredeemable families. Not everyone in a birth family is bad and in fact, many kin and parents are heroic, making unimaginable sacrifices to get their families back together through impossible odds. Yes, it is hard to let go of the kids we've grown to love, and yes, we do love them, but the reality is that because something is hard doesn't make it bad, and you aren't heartless if you can endure pain for the greater good of the children. It's not unnatural to put the interests of children ahead of your own.

8. **No, they aren't ours yet.** Foster care adoption takes a long time. The first year goal is always for kids to return to their parents and it can take longer than a year in some cases.

9. **Most kids will go home or to family rather than being adopted.** Most foster cases don't go to adoption. Not every foster parent wants to adopt and not every foster family that wants to adopt will be adopting/wants to adopt every kid. It is not appropriate to raise the possibility of adoption while the children are in foster care. It is especially not appropriate to raise this issue in front of the children. Family building is private.

10. **Fostering is HARD.** Take how hard you think it will be and multiply it by 10 and you are beginning to get the idea of how hard it is to foster. It is also GREAT and utterly worth it. It is like Tom Hanks' character in "League of Their Own" says about baseball: "It is supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

11. **You don't have to be a foster parent to help support kids and families in crisis.** If you want to foster, GREAT - the world needs more foster families. But we also need other kinds of help.

Other ways to help:

- **Treat foster parents with a new placement the way you would a family that had a baby** - it is just as exhausting and stressful. If you can offer to cook dinner, help out with the other kids, or lend a hand in some way, it would be most welcome.

- **Offer up items your children have outgrown** – foster parents who do short-term fostering send a lot of stuff home with the kids, and often could use more. Alternatively, many communities have a foster care closet or donation center that would be grateful for your pass-downs in good condition.
- **Be an honorary grandparent, aunt or uncle.** Kids need as many people in their lives as possible, and relationships that say “you are special.”
- **Become a respite provider.** Care for foster children for a week or a weekend so their parents can go away or take a break.
- **Offer to babysit.** Foster parents have lives and have to go to meetings and trainings, and can always use the help.
- **Be a big brother, sister or mentor to older foster kids.** Preteens and teens need help imagining a future – be that help.
- **Be an extra pair of hands when foster families go somewhere challenging** - offer to come along to the amusement park, to church, to the playground. A big family or one with special needs may really appreciate just an extra adult or a mother’s helper along.
- **Support local anti-poverty programs with your time and money.** These are the resources that will hopefully keep these kids fed and safe in their communities when they go home.
- **If you’ve got extra, someone else can probably use it.** Lots of foster families don’t have a lot of spare money for activities – offering your old hockey equipment or the use of your swim membership is a wonderful gift.
- **Make programs for kids friendly to kids with disabilities and challenges.** You may not have thought about how hard it is to bring a disabled or behaviorally challenged kid to Sunday school, the pool or the local kid’s movie night – but think about it now, and encourage inclusion.
- **Teach your children from the beginning to be welcoming, inclusive, kind and non-judgmental.** Teach them the value of having friends from different neighborhoods, communities, cultures, races and levels of ability. Make it clear that bullying, unkindness and exclusion are never ever ok.
- **Welcome foster parents and their family into your community warmly,** and ask them what they need and how you can help.
- **Reach out to families in your community that are struggling.** Maybe you can help prevent children from entering into foster care or to make it easier if they do. Some families really need a ride, a sitter, some emotional support, some connection to local resources. Lack of community ties is a huge risk factor for children coming into care. Make the attempt to offer support to prevent a crisis.