

# **When One Family Is Not Enough: The Lives of Young Children in Foster Care**

By Judy Harrison

*Every time a child is abused or neglected, the whole human race suffers."*

Wade Horn, HHS assistant secretary for children and families

## **Who Are Foster Children?**

The Administration for Children and Families (1999) reports that 520,000 children were in foster care in 1998. Fifty-nine percent of these children were under the age of 10, 31% under the age of 5. Most (50%) were placed in non-relative foster homes. The average length of stay for children in foster care was reported as 33 months, and 46% of children have been in the foster care system for at least two years. For 47% of children, the case goal is reunification with parents.

The number of children in foster care nationwide has increased significantly since the early 1980's. Recent trends in foster care include: 1) babies and very young children are entering foster care at a growing rate; 2) relatives are playing a larger role as foster parents for the children of their kin; and 3) African-American children are disproportionately represented in foster care, and are more likely to be waiting for adoption than to have been adopted (Spar, 1997).

According to the Child Welfare League of America (1997), children enter the foster care system for a variety of reasons:

- v 59% for protective service reasons;

- v 13% for other state-defined reasons (including a parent/child relationship or family interaction problem, an adoption plan or subsidized adoption, de-institutionalization, and unwed motherhood);
- v 12% because of parental condition or absence (illness, death, handicap or financial hardship);
- v 11% because of child's commitment of status or delinquent offenses;
- v 2% because of child's disability or handicap; and
- v 1% because of relinquishment of parental rights.

Alcohol and drug abuse are factors in the placement of more than 75% of the children who are entering care. Children who lose their parents to AIDS is another group in need of foster care. In addition, increasing numbers of children who are HIV infected are in foster care. Many of the children coming into care today are medically fragile and/or physically handicapped. Between 1984 and 1990 there was a 12% increase in the number of children who entered foster care because of their own handicap or disability.

### **The Role of Foster Parents**

Foster care homes are important for children that need a safe place to live. These homes are only provided temporarily and usually in an urgent situation. Children are often placed in a foster home because they have been removed from their family. Foster parents play a critical role in the welfare of the child, and often work closely with birth families, teachers, attorneys, social workers, doctors, and other agency officials. Foster parents are not there to replace the child's family; however, foster children have critical needs which a foster parent must meet. These

needs include food, shelter, support, encouragement, reassurance, self-esteem, self-worth, and most importantly, love.

“Foster parents provide a ray of hope in a world otherwise shadowed by issues that are dangerous to the child's physical and mental health” (<http://foster-parenting.com>). Physical abuse, neglect, abandonment, drug problems, alcohol problems, and sexual abuse are just some of the reasons that result in a child being removed from his or her home. Understandably the children are often afraid, angry, confused, and heart-broken from the events that led to their removal. Also, some foster children have special needs, such as emotional, behavioral, physical, or developmental problems. Every child needs a loving home where he or she can be safe and nurtured toward a better life. Adoption is often a consideration for foster parents. In fact, about two-thirds of the children placed in foster care are later adopted by their foster parents.

### **Young Children’s Experiences in Foster Care**

For children entering the foster care system, life is a maze of people, lifestyle changes and feelings of confusion. All children, regardless of their age at the time they are removed from their birth families, experience delays in their developmental milestones.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reports that approximately 500,000 children in the United States live in the foster care system. For most of them, their communities and families are characterized by inadequate education, employment, housing, health care and social supports. Numerous studies document that up to 80% of foster children have developmental or mental health problems. As a group they are over-represented in special education programs and in the juvenile justice system. Many have been exposed to such adverse biological and psychosocial risk factors as premature birth, prenatal drug and alcohol exposure,

parents with mental disorders, including substance abuse, high levels of violence in their homes and/or communities and child maltreatment. The majority of foster children have been seriously abused and/or neglected by their biological parents. Placement in foster care, while necessary, further subjects them to additional stress by disrupting attachments to family, friends and community. Despite their disproportionate mental health needs, most do not receive psychiatric care until their situation reaches a crisis point and some not even then.

Many times, foster children (and children who are being adopted) display negative behaviors that make it difficult to find a positive attribute for the child. When faced with this dilemma, remember that the child is trying to express himself in an adult world that does not make sense to him. Nothing could be worse than being taken from your parents because they either could not or would not take care of you. Anger should be an expected emotion from these children. It would be the emotion adults would express if they were in the same situation, and children have fewer coping skills than adults. The phrase “catch the child being good” describes a positive teaching strategy. Look for the positive in every child and build on that. When you model this behavior for the other adults in the children’s lives, you not only teach the children, but the adults that surround the children. What a wonderful gift we can give children when we surround them with individuals who love and nurture them in ways that make them feel special.

Children in foster care are three to six times more likely than children not in care to have emotional, behavioral and developmental problems including conduct disorders, depression, difficulties in school, and impaired social relationships. Some conservative estimates are that about 30% of the children in care have marked or severe emotional problems. According to a recent study, 58% of young children in foster care had serious health problems; 62% had been subject to prenatal drug exposure, placing them at significant risk for numerous health problems.

The educational needs of children in care can be substantial. Various studies have indicated that children and young people in foster care tend to have limited education and job skills; perform more poorly educationally than children who are not in foster care, lag behind in their education by at least one year, and have lower educational attainment than the general population (Child Welfare League, 1997).

As a foster mother for 32 years, children often express their frustrations to me. They don't understand why they were separated from their parents. Even children who are removed from their homes because of suspected abuse or neglect will align themselves with their birth families. Children have to believe that the people who brought them into this world are doing all the right things and that it is everyone else's fault that they were removed from their family. This is a coping strategy for even the youngest child. Children who are forced to face their parents' inability or unwillingness to care and provide for them face the devastating realization that they are unwanted and alone in the world.

### **Starting Over**

Some problems that a foster parent needs to be able to handle include setting discipline in the home, dealing with bed-wetting, lying, and rebellion. Foster parents need to act as any other parents, but with the added challenge of dealing with a child that has a troubled background and an already inflated fear of rejection. They need to provide a sense of belonging, acceptance, and love; however, these needs are usually met by the result of a small success following an enduring struggle with many early failures. And many times it is the case that after all this effort is put into a relationship with a foster child, the foster parent must be able to let go if the child needs to be relocated or placed back with his or her family.

When children are moved into a new family and household, all of the routine tasks of

everyday life become difficult.

- Why does this new mother serve only hot food for breakfast?
- Why do I have to use a napkin?
- I was told to make my bed. What does that mean?
- This new family does not talk like my birth family, so maybe I shouldn't talk. .

The same struggles occur when the foster child enters a new day care program, school, or meets a new respite provider. These environments add another layer of frustration for the child (and birth family and foster family. Child care staff have to learn to operate in this confusing middle ground, tempering all of the information they receive about the child and his/her birth and foster families with their role of teaching and nurturing the child.

### **The Teacher's Role**

One of the most important gifts the teacher can give a child is to listen. Children are likely to share their feelings with a teacher they trust. Guard that trust so children can count on you to hear what they need to say. Conversations, except those revealing child abuse or neglect, should be kept confidential. Children know if you can be trusted by the way you listen to them and respect what they have to say.

Refuse to allow negative comments about the child's living arrangements to be made inside your classroom. When confronted with negative comments about the child's life, keep quiet or change the subject. You can establish this rule by scheduling a meeting with everyone involved to explain your position, or you can prepare a handout for all parents when their children enter your classroom. Many of these suggestions would also apply to children whose parents are separated or in divorce proceedings, especially those involving custody battles. .

## **Focus on the Child**

The key to managing this situation well is to focus on the children 100% of the time.

- When talking with the children, focus on them, not on their living situations.
- When the children talk to you about their birth parents, foster parents, or social worker, tell them how important they are to all of these people. Children need to know that it is OK to be loved by many people.
- Never engage the child in conversations to satisfy your own curiosity. If you want to know what is going on, ask an adult. Children need to be children.
- Never discuss with co-workers, social workers or parents the particulars of the social services case in the child's presence. Discussions regarding his living situation should be conducted in an office.
- Insist that everyone maintain confidentiality about the child and his living arrangements.
- Don't take sides with anyone involved in the foster care arrangements of the child. The child's well-being should be your only concern.

## **Child Care as a Safe Refuge**

Celebrate something positive about each child everyday. Foster children often suffer from low self-esteem resulting from their abuse and neglect histories and their involvement with multiple agencies dedicated to protecting them. Protecting children is an adult activity that children cannot understand. A child's smile and enjoyment of the child care program should be celebrated.

- Take photographs,
- Write positive notes to children letting them know that you believe in them.
- Make duplicates of photos, notes, children's work to share with birth families and foster

families.

### **The Importance of Documentation**

Encourage all persons involved with the child to share information with you that will help you better understand the child's feelings and behaviors. Explain that you will be documenting the information in the child's folder. When someone begins to talk with you about the child, pick up pen and paper and begin writing. This practice of accurate, timely documentation minimizes miscommunication and discourages long-winded conversations. When the conversation is complete, show the person what you have written and if they agree, date and sign the comments. Your documentation should include the name of the person providing the information, date and time, and objective facts. Your documentation should be kept confidential in keeping with the policies of your center. If someone wants to share information "off the record," reiterate your policy and refuse to participate in the conversation.

### **Responding to the Needs of Foster Families**

Many times foster families feel as though they are not regarded as a "real" part of the child's life. They have total responsibility for the physical and emotional care of the child, but none of the legal or birth rights. There are strategies that can be used to help foster families feel more comfortable in your center or classroom.

First, review the application process to be certain that it is sensitive to the needs of all types of families. Ask each family -- birth and foster -- and social worker to fill out the forms. You will gain valuable insight into the child's life as well as the family dynamics surrounding the child in foster care. All parties care for the child in different ways and from different vantage points.

Second, when planning holidays, parent days and other "family" events, remember that

the foster child has two families and both need to be included. During the admission process, ask families how they want you to address this issue. A schedule of who will come to each function may need to be established or both families may be comfortable coming together. Each situation is different. Be sure each family knows they will be treated as “equals” in your classroom. The key to this strategy is planning.

Third, when making gifts for families, doing family trees, collecting pictures of families remember to encourage the child to bring pictures from both families, make two of the same gifts, and do two family trees. This is an excellent way to teach everyone in the classroom that all families are unique and special.

Fourth, ask the foster family if there is documentation they will need to meet the requirements of the social services agency. In most states, foster families must maintain a “Life Book” and daily documentation of the child’s activities. This not only makes the foster family feel as though you value them as professional caregivers, but gives the child a history of the time he spends with you in the classroom.

Finally, ask the foster parent how they want you to introduce them to other members of the staff. Constantly hearing, “This is \_\_\_\_\_’s foster mother” is unpleasant. For this moment in time this individual is performing all of the duties of parenting the child. Ask them how the child addresses them. Does he/she call them mom/dad or does the child call them by their first names? This will give the child the sense that you, the teacher, understand the differences between families. Most of my foster children and their parents refer to me as Momma Judy. The children’s teachers also addressed me as Momma Judy. There is a clear distinction between the birth mother and the foster mother.

Foster families present unique challenges to early childhood programs. Learning what

you can about these families, as well as other types represented in your program, communicates your respect for and appreciation for all of the forms that families take. Encouraging families to discuss their needs with you and to tell you about their living arrangements and the problems and opportunities these present can build a strong bridge between home and school that serves the children well while they are in your program and for years to come.

## References

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Spar, K. (1997, January). Foster care and adoption statistics summary. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families. (1999, January). How many children were in foster care on March 31, 1998. Available [Online]: [www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/rpt0199/ar0199a.htm](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/rpt0199/ar0199a.htm) (Retrieved April 15, 2004).

## Resources

**American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children**  
<http://www.apsac.org/>

### Books for Foster Families

<http://www.fostercarechildren.com/books/default.asp>

### Childabuse.org

<http://www.childabuse.org/>

### Institute for Children

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Boston, MA 02116

Phone: (617) 247-1117

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E-mail: [info@forchildren.org](mailto:info@forchildren.org)

URL: <http://www.forchildren.org/ifc/IfChome1.html>

National organization dedicated to reforming foster care and adoption regulations nationwide.  
State-by-state listing of foster care and adoption laws, statistics, program information, resources.

**National Foster Parent Association**

P.O. Box 81

Alpha, OH 45301-0081

Phone: 1-800-557-5238

Fax: (937) 431-9377

E-mail: [nfpa@donet.com](mailto:nfpa@donet.com)

URL: <http://www.nfpainc.org>

**National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning**

129 E. 79th Street

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E-mail: [nrcfcpp@shiva.hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:nrcfcpp@shiva.hunter.cuny.edu)

URL: <http://guthrie.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/>

**Survivors of the System: Foster Children United**

<http://www.nfpainc.org/>