

# FOSTER/ADOPT PRIDE



## “ 6 Things You Need to Know About Children In Foster Care”

I admit it freely. Before I was a foster parent, I knew very little about the foster care system. Like so many in society, I had misconceptions about what foster care was, what the children were like, and what foster parents do. Now, after 13 years of caring for children in foster care, and over 50 children through my own home, I continue to find that even my own family members and friends do not understand what it is truly like. Here are 6 things I want you to know about what it is truly like.

### 1. It's Not Their Fault:

Perhaps the biggest misconception about children in foster care is that the children are somehow at fault. When I was much younger, I had this same false belief, that children in foster care were bad kids, and that they did something wrong.

Yet, this is so far from the truth. These are children who are the victims. These are children who are suffering. Children suffering from abuse. Neglect. Malnutrition. Even drug-related problems passed on from a mother's addiction. Children rejected by those who were to love them most, their parents. When placed into a foster home, many of these children carry with them the physical and emotional scars that prevent them from accepting the love of another.

### 2. We are Not Saints

I often hear, on a weekly basis, that my wife and I are saints for caring for children in need, and opening up our homes and hearts to kids in foster care. In no way, and in no fashion, am I a saint, and I believe that foster parents from all over would echo that sentiment. We become tired, worn down, and exhausted. We have our own frustrations and disappointments. There are times when we succeed, and there are times when we experience failures. [Cont. page 2](#)



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“Where there is great love, there are always miracles”

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### ABOUT US

PRIDE is developed and published by UA\_LITTLE ROCK/MidSOUTH.

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### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### Love for a Foster Child

*“You may not have my eyes or smile but from that very first moment you had my heart.”*  
-unknown



We are not the perfect parents. We are simply trying our best to provide a home and family for a child who needs one, and help a child in need.

### 3. It Does Hurt:

It seems that the comment that is made to me the most by those who are not foster parents is this; "I could not do what you do. It would hurt too much to give the children from foster care back." As one who has cared for over 50 children in my own home the past 13 years, as well as traveling the country speaking about the foster care system, the question is one that I hear several times a week.

My response is this; "That's a good thing. It is supposed to hurt. Your heart is supposed to break!"

To be sure, children in foster care need stability and they need security. Yet, what they need the most is to be loved. As foster parents, we might be the first adults who have ever loved the child in a healthy and unconditional fashion. Sadly, for some children, we may be the only adults who will ever love the child in this fashion, in an unconditional manner. So, when the child leaves our home and our family, our hearts should break. We should experience feelings of grief and loss. After all, we have given all of our hearts and love to a child in need.



### 4. We Can't Save Them All:

No, we cannot. I understand that. I have been told this by friends and family, alike, as they question why I continue to bring children into my home, and into my family.

Yet, it is like the familiar Starfish story. A father and son were walking along a beach at sunrise after a huge storm. When they stepped onto the beach, they were met with thousands of starfish, littering the beach, hundreds in each direction. The boy bent down and picked up a starfish, throwing it far into the ocean. Again and again, he repeated the action.

After watching his son for some time, the father asked, "Son, what are you doing?"

"I'm throwing these starfish back into the ocean," the young boy answered.

"I see. But why are you doing this?" the father asked.

"When the sun comes out, and starts warming up the beach, the starfish will all die. I have to throw them back into the water."

### 5. Working with Birth Family:

Our foster child wants nothing more than to return home to his family. In fact, reunification is often the end goal for most foster children. As a foster parent, part of our mission is to support reunification with our foster child and his biological parents. What is important to consider, as well, is that many biological parents of foster children were abused themselves, and know of no other way when raising children. Also disturbing is that some birth parents were foster children, as well, and are just repeating the cycle they went through as a child. Certainly, there are reasons why their children are in care that we may never understand. Part of being a foster parent is helping the parents of the children living with us; helping our fellow human beings.



"But son, you can't save all of these starfish. You can't possibly make a difference."

The boy stopped for a moment to take in his father's words, then bent down, and picked up another starfish in his hand, before throwing it as far as he could back into the ocean. Turning to his father with a large grin spreading across his face, he simply said, "It made a huge difference for that one!"

And it can make a huge difference for each child from foster care we bring into our home.

### 6. The Hardest and Most Important Job:

Being a foster parent is often the hardest thing we do. After all, each time a new foster child comes into our families, there are new challenges, as each placement is unique, just as the child is, as well. Every placement will be different from each other, and it will not become routine. Some placements may even be unsettling. We do not have a "normal" life style, to be sure, and we make many sacrifices as we bring children in need, and in trauma into our family.

Yet, we are changing lives, while our own lives are being changed.



## "Secondary Traumatic Stress"

Foster Parents work daily, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with children who have been traumatized. Empathy is often the most important tool foster parents bring to helping the children in their care. Unfortunately, the more empathic they are the greater their risk for internalizing the trauma of their foster children. The result of this engagement is secondary traumatic stress.

### What is secondary traumatic stress? How is it the same and/or different from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

According to Dr. Charles Figley, author of *Compassion Fatigue, Coping with secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder*, secondary traumatic stress is "the natural consequent behaviors resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. It is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person". Until recently, when we spoke about persons being traumatized we were speaking only of those people who were directly exposed to the trauma. We referred to their condition as post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the last 15 years, we have come to recognize that people, who work with, listen to and try to help children and adults who have been traumatized are at risk for internalizing their trauma.

This condition is called secondary traumatic stress. The only difference between post-

traumatic stress disorder and secondary trauma is that with secondary trauma you are "a step away" from the trauma. The symptoms of primary or secondary trauma can be exactly the same! "The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet." \*(Rachel Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*)

### Why are foster parents at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress?

Listed below are just a few of those reasons.

**1) Empathy:** Empathy is an important tool we use to help children and families who have been traumatized. However, if we over empathize or over-identify with our foster children we place ourselves at risk of internalizing their trauma.

**2) Insufficient Recovery Time:** Foster parents often listen to their foster children describe some horrific events they have experienced. In addition, foster parents often hear the same or similar horror stories over and over again. With children in their home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, they are often deprived of the "time off" they need to heal or to get some distance. Secondary trauma is cumulative, so listening to these stories over and over again can have a negative effect on even the most compassionate and resilient foster parents.

**3) Unresolved Personal Trauma:** Many foster parents have had some personal loss or even traumatic experience in their own life (e.g., loss of a family member, death of a close friend, physical or emotional abuse). Unless the foster parent has healed from their own trauma they are at increased risk for internalizing the trauma of their foster child.

**4) Children are the Most Vulnerable Members of Our Society:** When adults maltreat children, it evokes a strong reaction in any person who cares about children. As the primary caretakers for vulnerable children, foster parents are at increased risk for having a strong emotional reaction to what they hear and learn about from these children. The inability of the foster parents to change the situation can make them feel even more vulnerable. (Figley, 1995)

### How do you know if you are suffering from secondary traumatic stress?

One of the most difficult tasks for a foster parent is to recognize if they are suffering from secondary traumatic stress. There are, however, several "individual indicators of distress" which can tell us that we are at increased risk for developing secondary trauma. A key indicator is when you find yourself acting and feeling in ways that don't feel normal to you. It is normal for all of us to have a range of emotions that include anger, sadness, depression or anxiety. However, when these emotions become more extreme or prolonged than usual, it is a potential indicator of distress. [Cont. Page 4](#)

**Return Service Requested**



## “Departure of a Foster Child”

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of being a foster parent is the moment when your foster child leaves your home. As a foster parent, your home becomes a place where foster children come for a period of time, with the goal of being reunited with their family in the near future. There are times when the removal of a foster child may come suddenly, and without any prior warning. You may only have a few days, or even a few hours, before your foster child is to move. This may be due to a court order, health reasons, or placement into another foster home. Other times, plenty of notice is given to the foster parents before-hand. Whenever you are told, there will sure to be emotions involved, for both you and the foster child.

One of the ways you can prepare for your foster child's departure is by organizing a Lifebook. This book can be a wonderful healing tool for your foster child as he moves to a new home. For some children, a Lifebook is the only reminder they may have of previous houses and families they once called home. Essentially, a Lifebook is a scrapbook of your foster child's life, and is something he can take with him to his new home, and throughout his life. Sadly, when many foster children are placed into a foster home, much of their early life story is lost, and can never be retraced. Think about throwing a going away party for your foster child as an opportunity to show him how much he will be missed. Invite the caseworker, church members, friends of the family along with his friends, and anybody else over that played an important part of his life with you. Perhaps you could give him some going away presents that he might remember you by. Make it as fun a party for him as possible, again showing him that he is cared for.

Packing for him can be emotional, as it may bring back memories of being removed from his previous home. How you pack for him will be important to his well being. First, make sure he has a suitcase, or suitcases. It does not need to be a brand new one; some foster parent associations or child welfare agencies may offer these for free. Second, nicely fold all of his clothing and belongings in the suitcases, including him in this. If he has a lot of toys or large items, you may have to use boxes for these.

Make sure you pack everything he owns, including everything he came with to your home. Third, include as many group photographs of him with your family as possible. Pictures of you and your family may help him in the grieving process of leaving your home, and can serve as a valuable reminder that he is loved and cared for. Finally, place some self addressed self stamped envelopes in his suitcase so that he can write to you from his new home. Add some stationary, pencils, and pens, so that he has everything he needs to write to you. Also, include contact information for him, such as your address, phone numbers, and email address in his Lifebook. <http://drjohndegarmofostercare.weebly.com>.

## Secondary Traumatic Stress, cont.

### Self-Care Strategies for Combating Secondary Trauma Stress

Understanding your own needs and responding appropriately is of paramount importance in combating secondary traumatic stress. For foster parents it is critically important to find ways to “get a break” from parenting. To avoid feeling overwhelmed by feelings of frustration and sadness it is important to engage in activities you consider fun and playful. Any person working with maltreated or traumatized children needs to set aside time to rest,otionally and physically, and to engage in activities that restore their sense of hope. Remember, in the end, our ability to help children who have suffered depends upon our ability to care for ourselves....physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually, so we can be there for them when they need us. **Adapted from an article by David Conrad. Secondary trauma and foster parents: understanding its impact and taking steps to protect them.** <https://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/rcpdfs/Sec.Trauma-foster.pdf>