

On The Unexpected Rewards of Foster Parenting: An Interview with a Fairfax County Foster Parent

Who better to share their foster parenting experiences than foster parents themselves? Here are the thoughts offered by a long time foster parent, R.D., of Fairfax County, in a recent interview:*

** Names of foster parents are confidential to protect the privacy of the children.*

Q: What interested you in becoming a foster parent in the first place. How did it happen for you? What finally "brought you in"? What is your motivation to care for these children?

A: While my father was fighting terminal cancer, I realized how fortunate I was to have loving, skilled parents. I felt that I had learned a lot from them about parenting and that I shouldn't waste that gift. Having never been a parent, I started with short-term volunteer emergency foster care as a practical way to "try out the water" without the burden of a long-term commitment.

Q: Did you attend an orientation and/or training for foster care and has it been helpful?

A: I attended orientation at several levels, as well as follow-up training and meetings with foster parents. Training has been excellent. We have numerous training and refresher opportunities each year.

Q: How long have you been a foster parent? To how many children have you been a foster parent?

A: I started in 1989 doing Emergency Foster Care. Over a three-year period, I cared for 23 children for periods ranging from 4 days up to the maximum of 6 weeks. I also served as a "home away from home" for teens in group home placements who had no local "home" to go to on holidays or when they had earned special privileges.

In 1992, when I stopped working out of my home, I switched to full time Foster Care/Mentoring for older teens, since I could no longer be at home when school let out. I have had ten young men share part of their lives with me, the longest staying almost four years. I am still in touch with most of them.

Q: Please talk generally about the child or children you have had in your care. What are their stories, their challenges--and how have they coped?

A: I have [fostered] young men from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They have all been good kids who suffered separation from their birth families

through no fault of their own. They all wrestled with the attachment dilemma of wanting someone to believe in them and trust them, while having a mistrust of adult authorities (who facilitated their separation from family). Most had fallen behind in formal schooling, but responded to a stable learning environment. Most were behind their peers in life skill development. All were trustworthy and eager to demonstrate it. All were typical teens with a burning desire for, and a masked fear of, independence. Each one was different; each had his own special needs and each delivered his own special joy.

Q: What are some of the challenges foster parents face?

The challenges are no different than those of other parents raising their own children. In many ways, it is easier. First, the children know separation. They want to be a part of your family and they really appreciate your generosity (although they are afraid of, and unskilled at, expressing it). Foster parents have the support of social workers, counselors, Guardian ad litem, and other foster parents. We have a team ready to recognize and address problems at early stages. Most other parents hesitate in engaging outside expertise until the problem “gets out of hand.”

Q: What are the rewards?

*A: **Shared growth.** Since many of these youth have experienced significant interruptions in their emotional development, imagine the rate at which they will grow in a supportive, nurturing environment. Watching an 18 year-old youth learning to walk life's walk is just as rewarding as watching an 18-month-old baby take his first steps. More remarkably, you will find that you also have grown. I am ever so thankful to my sons for the person they have made of me.*

***Shared experiences.** I have expanded my interests in music, arts, languages, sports, nature, and relationships in ways that I might not have imagined. The photos, the stories, the souvenirs, and the memories of adventures large and small will be a part of my life and a part of the heritage that is passed to their children.*

***Sharing.** When you focus your life on helping others, your own problems lose significance and fade to tranquility.*

Q: What kind of person are you? What are some of your personality traits?

A: Faith is by far the strongest tool I have to work with. From faith comes the patience required to truly understand what is really going on in an adverse situation. Faith provides the assurance that God will never thrust you into a situation that you cannot handle if you seek and follow His guidance.

From faith sprouts consistency; including the ability to embrace change and adapt to new situations. Each child is special and has unique needs. One wants

to be hugged; the other fears any physical contact. Foster children yearn for consistency in their troubled lives.

I have to work at listening. I cannot help a child with his problem unless I truly understand that problem as he sees it. Too often I catch myself trying to fit a “standard solution” to the wrong problem—i.e. not the problem that the child perceives.

Q: What have you experienced as a foster parent that you think others would be interested in knowing about?

A: Requirements for the job:

Be prepared to share your most precious commodities: time and love. These young folks have been denied both. They respond with enthusiasm to even the smallest doses of personal attention.

Be ready to learn. Parenting is a learning, evolutionary interaction unique to each young person. The Department of Family Services provides excellent training. We get together bi-monthly, and call each other as needed, to share experiences in personalizing the training to our charges.

Be flexible and firm. An oxymoron? Not at all. You have some house rules (smoking, substance involvement, physical acting out, household security, privacy) that are absolute. The teen wants to know these up front and expects you to rigorously adhere to them. Other house rules (telephone usage, curfews, chores, visitors, dating, use of the family car) should evolve as the teen matures. Be flexible and open in defining the criteria for such evolution.

Avoid being judgmental. None of us like to be judged. These teens, in particular, have had a troubled life of harsh, impetuous judging by parents resulting in consequences that led to a flurry of adult family members, social workers, therapists and judges arguing to a decision to separate them from their birth parents. They really need a break from the vicious cycle of judgment.

Discipline the act, not the person. They will accept responsibility and discipline if your rules are clear and repercussions are perceived as logical rather than judgmental. Involve the teen in determining the appropriate punishment (they will invariably determine a harsher consequence than what you had contemplated).

NOT required:

Significant financial assets. If you have a separate bedroom in your home, and room in your heart, and if you are able to meet your daily living needs, you qualify. The Department of Family Services provides Medicaid, a legal representative (Guardian ad litem) and living allowances to support the child.

Years of direct experience raising your own children. If your mind is open, and you are willing to take advantage of the training offered, you can be an excellent parent.

A martial arts proficiency and high-risk insurance. Of course, there are risks taking anyone into your home, but it is important to remember that these children are VICTIMS, not criminals. They have proven themselves worthy of placement in your home through an exhaustive matching process conducted by the Department of Family Services.

One can leave no finer legacy than the sharing of a Helping Hand.