



pact's

# point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## Does Fost-Adoption Encourage Healthy Growth?

By Jodee Kulp

Above the soapy water in the kitchen sink, a small vase held a tiny red bloom of Sedum. It looked miraculously like a small rose on a skinny, wiggly stem, pulled from its life-giving roots. My see-the-world-differently, almost nine-year-old daughter had given it to me to take care of because "it was picked too early and it might die if you don't take care of it ... and... if the roses were truly already blooming, then springtime was really here, and if springtime was truly here it meant shorts and puddles and bikes and ... and ... and ...." Off she went singing and shouting, in her shorts, through the puddles, on her bike. It had taken eight years for her life to reach springtime.

My mind wandered back to the first day I met April Rose, a tiny five-month-old, failing to thrive, refusing to make eye contact, refusing to accept love, care or touch, capable of the most incredible screaming I had ever heard. This child turned our family upside down as we worked to turn her world right side up, helping her gain the security to trust.

I met the sparkling eyes of my husband as he shook his head, "What a character. You know we needed to be as old as we are to parent that one. It takes all the investment we've made in foster parenting, in our marriage and in our professional lives to reach the level of competence, focus and patience needed to parent her." I agreed.

The world of foster parenting brought April Rose into our lives, and without the experiences provided by foster parenting complex children, we would not have been prepared for the world we were about to enter with this wisp of a child. Foster parenting prepared us to love this child unconditionally back to life, while risking no legal guarantee of permanence. Our foster parenting experience gave us the ability and the passion to parent this child and while respecting the reality that she belonged not only to herself, but also to another set of parents.

Therein begin the problems of Fost-Adopt...

Foster parents may know who the parents and siblings of the child are. That is true. It means that in Fost-Adoption the family and the child know the past; the child is not denied the reality of other relationships or historic life events. In some cases, relationship with birth parents, extended family members and/or siblings continue. April Rose has one home and one set of heart parents; she also has a giggly, whispering relationship with her older sister, who lives in another family,

and a beginning curiosity to get to know her birth father. These relationships will not be denied to her. The sister relationship blesses not only her, but also our family, by providing friendship, information and comparisons when behavioral issues arise. Because of foster parenting, I do not fear the new relationships, the old relationships or our relationship with our daughter. I am secure that each has its own place and each is important.

The focus of foster parents is on the immediate needs of the child, not on a long-term relationship. Special-needs children with major life trauma and breakages need triage work — immediate emergency relationship care. This is more than just loving another person. It is focusing adult attention beyond love to analyze and understand the needs of the child, to seek out resources to enhance the child's life and to develop a safe and protective atmosphere for the child to grow in. Foster parents don't expect an immediate warm and loving relationship with the child. There is no fantasy that this will be smooth sailing. With injured children, loving back can take forever, and forever is a long time when you're faced with 24-hour-a-day care. April rose gave me a "real" hug less than six months ago. She has since then smothered her mother — me — with healthy affection and kisses. It took eight years.

Foster care is a bad life experience for children. It can be. April Rose knew five competent, loving caregivers in five months, but no significant person was available consistently over that period of time. Each placement was handled by competent caring professionals "in her best interest." Without any understanding of what life was about, she was left with a trail of breakages that took years to repair. Some children have rivers of broken promises and lost relationships so wide it takes years to bridge them. Fost-Adopt can provide a safe, perhaps even distant relationship to a broken child, but the child is neither suffocated nor stifled by the issue of permanency.

Fost-Adopt removes quality foster homes from the system. It focuses the skills and competency of trained professional parents in concentrated doses on one specific or a number of specific children. New needy children may not enter the home, but the life of one child and thus generations are changed forever. The child knows that the Fost-Adopt family made a choice for permanency. The child's growth can continue in the environment he or she is already accustomed to.

Fost-Adopt isn't the answer for every child in need of permanency. Each child and each situation varies from all others. Combining other people's children into other people's families is complex work. What makes adoptions successful is the connection between one human being and another human being. It may click. If that click is made in the foster care home, then that relationship needs to be respected.

In January, I submitted the 1995 Minnesota Report to NACAC (North American Council on Adoptable Children). The Minnesota Project was a review of one year's work in the Fost-Adopt program. It was pulled together from anonymous interviews with some of the best foster parents, attorneys, social workers and adoption therapists in the state. By remaining anonymous, individuals felt enabled to speak candidly regarding this issue. Following are a few excerpts:

**Adoption Attorney:**

Placement policy needs to be reviewed seriously and overhauled especially when younger children are involved. We need to acknowledge the well-being of children and the length of time a child is in a home relative to the age of the child. We need to be aware of the damage done to the child by moving the child to another stranger's home instead of allowing the adoption by the foster family.... One of the biggest difficulties my clients face is the predisposition of the county to view the foster home as a temporary placement facility and not a potential adoptive home. What the county fails to realize is that, regardless of what the foster parents do personally to guard themselves, the children are going to bond with the people they live with, who are kind and loving and provide their daily lifestyle. They cannot blame foster parents for having a child attach to their family system, even though they are being professional in their own relationship to the child.

**Foster Parent:**

I am just a quote "foster parent," unquote. They said things like, "you make too much money in foster care." A dollar an hour per child is so much? What professional works with children at that rate? I'd say foster parents are a bargain, and adoptive parents are a real bargain, especially if the state can wash the kids out of the system and not be responsible for them any longer and place all the responsibility on the new adoptive family.... Going from a foster family to adoptive family of the very same children will put my whole family at financial risk. But you know what, these kids want to stay here and that risk for their personal benefit is worth it.

**Social worker:**

I wish we could serve children and not just philosophical ideas. Social services needs to get out of the ivory tower and meet the needs of the children. They are the future of this country and how we treat them will matter. It would be easier right from the beginning to know if termination was going to take place so the right high-risk legal Fost-Adoption home could be found immediately. Fost-Adoption families walk a very emotional path. Day-to-day life can be adoption "on" one day and adoption "off" the next. We need designated staff who specialize in working with these families for long term support and training needs.

Last night when I arrived home, the house was quiet. The little "rose" was lying in a shallow puddle. I smiled and gently put it back into the protection of its vase. I noticed the new growth — tiny roots, struggling for life. I turned out the light and went to check in on the almost nine-year-old peacefully sleeping. I kissed her soft cheek, thinking that breakages are so powerful and transplanting is so difficult, but with care and attention those new roots do grow and eventually there is springtime!

*Jodee Kulp is a Fost-Adoptive parent and author of Families At Risk, A Guide For Foster Families.*

