

What it Means to be a Foster Parent:

All my life I wanted to be a foster parent. I'm not completely sure what drove me, but it would be safe to assume it stems from my own childhood, which found me embraced by a family who did not give birth to me. Through adoption I was blessed with a family, but as many adopted children know, there is a restlessness involved in being denied that primal connection with your family of origin.

Shortly after getting married, during my pregnancy with my first child, the first call came to pick up twin girls. Twin babies! They had been left home unattended. I was going to save those poor babies. And the next set of twins, and the baby with the seven broken bones. Don't forget the moody teenager and the neglected brothers with scabs and scars covering their little bodies. It made me feel good to provide them with the things their parents couldn't. Or wouldn't.

As with many dreams, this one came with a strong dose of reality. The children did not immediately blossom and thank me for turning their lives around. Each step forward took unexplainable time and energy, and wasn't necessarily greeted with overflowing gratitude. These children were hurting, and I wasn't the end-all to their pain. What they wanted most was the one thing I couldn't provide. They wanted their parents, and their siblings, and the things that were familiar. A healthy meal, a warm bed and a nurturing environment...while all wonderful things to provide, they did not—**COULD NOT**—replace what they had lost. I couldn't save them.

In many ways, they saved me. They saved me from a life of thinking that what I had was so much better for them than what their families could provide. I learned that a parent's love is priceless and cannot be substituted, so I shouldn't try. Each child needed me to understand that. I also learned that healing their wounds did not heal their hearts. Stopping their hunger did not stop their longing. They showed me.

I did not become a good foster parent overnight, but I know that I did get there. Sharing some words of wisdom, therefore, comes from years of experience. To any new foster parent, I would like to say: each child is precious and unique and will need something different from you; every child needs you to respect their birth families and their culture; no child needs you to save them, they just need you to hold them tight until the storm passes.

Lastly, remember to celebrate their little lives for however long you have been blessed to be in them. Good luck...and enjoy!