



## A Voice From Within: Growing Up as a Birth Child in a Foster and Adoptive Home

By Mike Heath, Lead Resource Specialist

All of us have stories and memorable experiences from our childhood that we fondly recall and share with others.

Each of our stories is unique and elicits a multitude of emotions and subsequent feelings. All of these childhood experiences have helped to create a lasting impression on who we are and who we have become as adults.

I connected with an insightful woman who was a birth child in a home with several foster and adoptive children, as well as other birth children.

She shared her experiences of growing up surrounded by a houseful of smiling faces.

What must it have felt like, I wondered, to have grown up in a foster and adoptive family in which you were neither in foster care nor adopted? Your family dynamics would change not in nine months with the addition of a baby brother or sister but sometimes in nine minutes, with the welcoming of a child placed into your household via foster care.

Change was constant and the unexpected soon became the expected. Suddenly you found yourself in the position of sharing your toys, your bathroom, your personal space, and most importantly of all, sharing the attention of your parents.

In this story, we have changed the names of the people involved in order to protect their privacy.

### Marissa's Memoir

Marissa grew up in a loving home surrounded by numerous siblings in Wisconsin. Marissa's parents had "hearts of gold," and they were driven to help as many children as they could who were in

need of love, guidance, and support.

Marissa's parents would stop at nothing to open their hearts and home to children.

Marissa recalls that when she was six-

years old, the first of many children was welcomed into their home. By the time she was 10, several children had been adopted. Marissa's family grew by leaps.

### Growing Up in the Foster Care Fast Lane

Marissa smiles when she remembers back to the times in which her family expanded through foster care and adoption. She recalls all of the joyful family experiences.

Marissa also has recollections of the difficult times and the struggles that many of the children had experienced prior to arriving at their home.

She realized that many children who came through their front door were victims of abuse

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and neglect. This was a difficult and complex subject to comprehend at such a young age.

Children are supposed to be loved and protected by their parents, but Marissa learned that this was not the case for all children.

Marissa saw the traumatic scars, bruises, and broken bones caused by child abuse and neglect. She also learned at a young age about the devastating effects that are caused from severe trauma and neglect.

Emotional scars are invisible to the naked eye but the residual internal affects can last for years to come. This was a life-changing experience for Marissa—one she never will forget.

In addition, several of the children had physical or mental health care issues. Marissa learned how to provide toileting care and other daily living care and support services for children. She was making a difference by reaching out to her foster care and adoptive siblings.

### **Additional Life Lessons Learned**

Marissa was forced to attempt to process the complex feelings of grief and loss at a young age. She became attached to her foster siblings, and she remembers the feelings of pain and loss when suddenly Bobby-Jo didn't come home. She later discovered that Bobby-Jo had been reunited with her parents. She was happy for Bobby-Jo but sad that she and her siblings did not even have the opportunity to say good bye.

When asked what it felt like to grow up with foster and adoptive siblings, Marissa says, "I grew up real fast." Foster care and adoption provided her with a "bigger look to the world."

### **Suggestions for Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents**

**B**ecoming a foster and/or adoptive family is a major decision that will ultimately affect the whole family. Marissa believes that birth children, "do not have to make the final decision, but they should be included *in* the discussion."

Obtaining a birth child's feedback is an important factor in making a final decision regarding fostering or adopting.

- Include children in the conversation about foster care or adoption
- Listen to your children
- Trust your inner feelings
- Obtain as much background information on children as possible
- Don't be afraid to say no—it's "ok" to say "no" to having children placed in your home.

Marissa says that she gained empathy as a result of growing up with foster and adoptive siblings. She realized early on that many children have experienced unimaginable experiences. She says she gained the invaluable insight that when you think your problems are insurmountable, you gain a new perspective when you realize the incredible challenges that others have had to overcome in their young lives.

### **A Balancing Act**

Marissa now has a greater appreciation of her parent's incredible commitment to their family, but as a child, it was sometimes hard to understand. Balancing the needs of a large

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### Meeting the Needs of All of the Children

**M**arissa recommends that foster and adoptive parents focus on all of the children and their needs to be recognized, honored, and appreciated. The hustle of a household full of children can result in feeling like you are being lost in the shuffle.

Parents need to make certain that the needs of all of the children are being met.

Communication between parents and children is an important resource for the entire family. Mother-child and father-child times are essential.

#### **Additional suggestions:**

- Be enthusiastic for all the children and their accomplishments.
- Show and tell the children that you appreciate them.
- Keep the lines of communication open with all of the children.
- Be consistent with your expectations for all of the children in your household.
- Respite is important for everyone.
- Finding balance is essential.
- Provide your birth children with a network of support.

Checking in continually with all of the children in your family is paramount. Little things can go along way, like following through with a special outing with each of the children.

family is hard in itself, but even more challenging when some of the family members had many medical, psychological, and other health care concerns . A myriad of medical appointments was the norm, and shuffling schedules was a daily event.

### Memorable Experiences

Marissa is proud of her parents and grateful for the experiences and lessons she learned from growing up in a foster and adoptive family. To this day, her siblings share a strong bond and never- ending friendship with one another.

Marissa gained an appreciation for the love and devotion that her parents had for all of the children. Marissa's family would welcome children unconditionally into their home who had been subjected to unimaginable trauma. Her parents taught all of the children to stop at nothing in order to accomplish reaching their goals for anything they truly believed in.

In addition, Marissa learned valuable and life changing lessons from her parents and from her birth, adoptive and foster care siblings. As with any family, there were good times and challenging times but through them all, Marissa treasures her experiences growing up as a birth child in a foster and adoptive home.

One of Marissa's treasures is a family portrait that she shared with me during our interview. She introduced me to her family by sharing the family portrait and sharing numerous stories, fond memories, and cherished family traditions. Foster care and adoption forever enriched their lives.

