

While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

JUNE 2004

A Look into the Lives of Foster Families Who Have Recently Adopted



When you begin the process of becoming a foster or adoptive parent, common advice is to speak to experienced foster and adoptive parents and find out more about what to expect, how to prepare yourself, and how to deal with issues that surface along the way. This issue features the stories of two foster families who later adopted. These experienced families have tips to pass on to prospective foster and adoptive parents. (See pages 2 and 3.)



Left to right: Lary, Andrew, and Janette Green, Christina Calkins-Green, Stacey Cotton (the Greens' worker), and Lorenzo Green

Committed to Keeping Siblings Together

Janette and Lary Green weren't planning to adopt when Andrew came into their lives in 1999. They had raised three of Lary's children, and Janette's daughters, Erika and Janai, were both in high school.



Andrew, Christina, and Lorenzo

"It's kind of a soap opera story," says Janette. "My girls returned from a visit with their father with Andrew, who at the time we thought was the girls' half-brother. Andrew's mother was hoping we would agree to take care of him while she worked at the State Fair. Erika and Janai occasionally

babysat Andrew when they visited their dad, and were excited when we agreed to let him stay."

When the Fair ended and Andrew's mother didn't pick him up, Janette called the county for help. They granted the Greens an emergency kinship foster care license, and their paperwork, home study, and house inspection were completed while Andrew stayed with them. Three months later Andrew's mother came to get him.

After several difficult months where child protection monitored Andrew's health and safety, he was placed permanently with the Greens. Then, a year later, a county worker called to say that the rest of Andrew's siblings had been removed from their home and asked if the Greens could handle one more—Lorenzo, Andrew's five-year-old brother. They readily agreed.

Andrew's and Lorenzo's older sister Christina had been placed with another foster family. Janette's daughters were still living at home, and the Greens didn't have room for Christina, but they invited her for visits and overnights so she could be with her brothers.

In May 2003, after the children's parental rights were terminated, Janette and Lary were about to sign the adoption papers for Andrew and Lorenzo when they realized they now had room for Christina. Janette's oldest daughter had moved out and her youngest was away at college. The Greens had always wanted the siblings to stay together, and since Christina's foster family was not planning to adopt her, they moved forward with their plans to adopt all three kids. In July, Christina moved in, and the adoptions were finalized February 13, 2004.

"All three kids are doing well, but they each have some form of special needs," says Janette. "Right now, actually, Andrew is in the gifted program at Longfellow school in St. Paul. He scored high on the district kindergarten tests. Plus he's extremely talented artistically. His art teacher says she's never seen anything like it in her 15 years of teaching."

Lorenzo has significant special needs. "He was five when he came to us—still in diapers, and drinking from a bottle," says Janette. "He has tested out as moderately retarded with severe delays. He's the same size as Andrew and they are three years apart." Doctors say Lorenzo most likely experienced nutritional and environmental deprivation and possibly prenatal exposure to alcohol.

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Experienced Parents Offer Tips to Prospective Parents

The following tips are from two experienced foster and adoptive parents, Janette Green and Sandra Brower. They have learned from their experiences and have valuable information to pass on to prospective parents.

- 1. Ask questions.** Don't allow yourself to feel intimidated by anything or anyone. Becoming a foster or adoptive parent is a major undertaking, and you deserve to learn everything that will help you and your family be successful.
- 2. Seek out experienced foster or adoptive parents.** People who have fostered or adopted children similar to the children you are interested in caring for can be a tremendous resource to you. Ask for and listen to their advice. If possible, spend time with them, watch how they interact with their children, and learn strategies for how to successfully parent children with special needs.

Ask parents who attend a foster or adoptive support group if you can attend a meeting to broaden your network of adult support. Not only can these families help you make decisions before you foster or adopt, they can be excellent contacts for future needs, too.

- 3. Stay open-minded.** Some children may be a good match for your family even if they were not a good match for another family. Sandra Brower experienced this first hand and explains, "Our six-year-old was first placed with another family, actually some good friends of ours. They saw some sexual acting-out behavior that really concerned them, and caused them to change their minds about adoption. When this same child was placed in our home, we never saw this behavior and still haven't. He was only three at the time, and their family is more open about allowing boys and girls to change clothes in the same room than our family. We decided he may have been curious more than anything. We have since participated in attachment therapy with him and the adoption is going really well."
- 4. Make a commitment to learn more about attachment.** Most foster and adopted children have issues with attachment and some experi-

ence more difficulty forming attached relationships with their new families than others.

There are also many excellent resources on attachment that you can read while you wait for a placement. (See #9 for suggestions on where to find them.) Later, consider attending attachment therapy sessions after you have a foster or adoptive placement.

- 5. Proceeding slowly can be good.** It is tempting to feel frustrated and want things to move quickly when you are waiting for a foster or adoptive placement. The Brower family began the adoption process with a daughter a year ahead of their son. Although his adoption went through before hers, the Browsers stress that both adoptions went extremely well.



6. Detailed documentation about your foster or adopted child's special needs and corresponding services is important.

As you consider and care for foster and adopted children, take the time to get detailed documentation from physicians, therapists,

psychologists, and other professionals who have worked with the child.

Accurate documentation can help your child receive services that may in turn help maintain a quality life for your child. Sandra Brower explains, "We need adaptive equipment for some of our children. One example is our little girl who is small for her age. She is four years old but only about the size of a one-year-old and can't ride a regular bike. Our [adoption assistance] helps us buy adaptive things [like a special bike] for her so she can be like other four-year-olds."

- 7. Become educated.** "Take all the classes you can, especially on attachment, bonding, and fetal alcohol syndrome," says Sandra. "You need to be prepared that [the children you get] might

have been in 10 different homes and have a lot of learned behaviors.”

“Some kids may look like brats or seem defiant, when in reality it’s just their way of hanging on to what they have. The better educated you are, the better prepared you will be,” adds Sandra.

- 8. Make use of good educational materials.** There are excellent educational materials available for foster and adoptive parents. Janette Green talks about materials that helped her, “We got a packet of adoption materials from our worker that were excellent. (See the booklets pictured below that are published by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.) I referred to the information in the books a lot during the last couple of months before our adoption.

Everything is spelled out—each step of the process. We didn’t have to make a lot of phone calls to our worker because we knew what was going to happen. They are excellent.” (See the March 2004 *While You Wait* for a more extensive list of resources that can help you prepare to become a foster or adoptive parent to children with special needs.)



- 9. Rely on other people when the process becomes difficult.** It is important to trust and use the support people who are available to you. Some situations can be unnerving to prospective parents, and you may need additional support to work through them.

Twice relatives came forward with the intent to adopt when the Greens were in the middle of adopting three siblings. Both times, the Greens’ worker organized a meeting with the relatives and the Greens and she carefully facilitated the emotional discussions, making sure the focus stayed on what was best for the kids.

In one case, the siblings’ brother, who was trying to turn his life around, was considering adopting the kids. He wasn’t prepared for the responsibility and mostly he feared he and other siblings would not be allowed to see the kids if the Greens adopted. “I assured him there would be weekly or at least consistent visits with the kids if that’s what they wanted. Once he heard it from me,

things were OK and we completed the adoption,” says Janette.

- 10. Speak with a supervisor if you don’t get the help you need.** Janette offers one piece of advice: “If your worker doesn’t return your calls—get the supervisor involved. I was patient for too long in a couple of cases. I should have contacted the worker’s supervisor sooner,” says Janette. “I tell people to press 0# when their worker doesn’t answer their calls. Pressing 0# usually gets you back to the operator and you can ask to speak to a supervisor.”

- 11. Learn to value post-adoption classes and services available to foster children.** Check with foster and other adoptive parents and ask about services their children have used and classes they have taken that have been beneficial. Janette took classes offered to parents at Children’s Home Society while [12-year-old] Christina participated in Kids Time—a class where kids could let off steam, talk about adoption, and have fun.

“There was also a life-planning class that Christina attended. That class was the turning point for Christina being able to begin to accept what was happening in her life,” says Janette. “The social worker and

child advocate take pictures of the schools the child attended and the houses the child lived in and write a life story from birth to current life.”

“The process answered a lot of questions for Christina, like how her mom was unable to care for her due to drugs and alcohol and because she was fighting depression. I think it also helps to hear this from someone else, instead of me saying it to Christina. If it were me telling her, it could seem like I was trying to take Christina away from her [birth] mom.”

“When I read through Christina’s book, it makes me cry. You can see in the first part when she writes, ‘I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to be here.’ In the middle she starts to open up, and by the end there is a huge difference,” adds Janette. “It has really helped her.”



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“Christina is a typical teenager with issues she is now working on. The therapist who evaluated her didn’t recognize her after she started living with us. We got her hair cut and bought her some new glasses. Her smile, her attitude, and her emotional outlook changed overnight. To this day, the therapist says the change in Christina is one of the biggest transformations she has seen in a child. Christina has grown from being shy, withdrawn, and unsure—to joining the band, serving on the student council, taking acting classes, and now, trying out for a part in a play at the Stepping Stone Theater,” says Janette.

The family is doing well. Last fall, the Greens, who were once nearly done raising their family, happily dropped one daughter off at college and then drove their youngest to kindergarten.

Feelings of Attachment Lead to Adoption

Nine years ago Sandra and Robert Brower started out primarily as foster parents to medically fragile children, and they never intended to adopt. They have four birth children ranging from 26 to 14. When three-month-old Sabrina was placed with them four years ago and her parental rights were terminated, the Browsers changed their minds and decided to adopt her.

A year later, the Browsers welcomed three-year-old Jonathon who had been in foster care since birth. “He is diagnosed with attachment disorder,” says Sandra. “And after he had been with us for a week, my husband said, ‘Well, he’s not leaving.’ So we decided to adopt him too. Surprisingly, Jonathon’s adoption went through a year before Sabrina’s.”

“Ryan, who turned five in May, has been with us since he was 11 months old,” added Sandra. “He is on the adoption list for waiting children. He requires total care. He has severe brain damage, is blind, and in a wheel chair. His birth mother’s parental rights have been terminated, but since he has been with us, we have encouraged her to visit him.”

At one time a family who was planning to move out of state was interested in adopting Ryan. “It just broke my heart that [if he was adopted by them] his mom would not be able to see him again. She has some mental health issues and can’t take care of him, but really loves him. So then, of course, we thought ‘He’s been with us *forever*, we might as well adopt Ryan too.’ His adoption has not gone through yet,” says Sandra. “We’re still working through the subsidy part of it.”

“Then, a year ago, Michael, an infant who was burned in a fire, was placed with us,” says Sandra. “We hope to



Left to right, front row: Jonathon and Sabrina Brower. Back row: Angela Prudhomme, Robert Brower, Sandra Brower, Rachel Prudhomme, and Rebecca Brower



adopt him too. He has an older brother in foster care in North Dakota. We told [the workers] if they want to keep the boys together, we will adopt them both. We are excited; Michael’s brother is coming for a weekend visit soon to get to know his brother again,” she added.

The Browsers also have three foster children: Isiah, 5; Brandon, 11; and Jasmine, 14. “Counting our two daughters who are still living with us, we have nine kids at home now,” says Sandra. “Our biological daughters are very accepting and helpful. I don’t think they have a friend who comes over that doesn’t ask if we need help changing a diaper or whatever.”

Sandra adds, “Out in public people sometimes make comments about Jonathon’s autism or Michael’s burned face, but nothing stops our older children from taking the kids places. Our older children mean as much to [our newly adopted children] as my husband and I do.”

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We encourage you to reproduce and distribute this newsletter.

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