

# While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

MAY 2003



## *Expanding Your View: Shortening Your Wait*

### *Why Some Parents Wait Longer*

As a prospective foster or adoptive parent, you may feel frustrated waiting for a child placement, especially when you hear ads recruiting new foster or adoptive parents and you have been approved for a long time. One of the reasons why parents wait so long is they are waiting for different children than the ones who are in need of families.

Currently there are almost 700 children waiting to be adopted in Minnesota, 250 of whom are listed on the Minnesota adoption exchange registry—all children who are unable to safely return to their birth families and do not have relatives who are able to adopt them. There are also 340 active families listed on the registry—families who have completed their home study and are ready to adopt. Looking at the numbers, there appear to be more than enough families to adopt the children who are waiting. You might ask:

- Why are children waiting for families when there are more than enough active families listed on the Minnesota adoption exchange registry?
- Why aren't the matches being made between the children and families?



One obstacle preventing matches between children and families is that many prospective adoptive parents are waiting for children who are not likely to be available. For example, many parents are waiting to adopt infants. Many parents are determined to adopt an infant or toddler, but of the 250 children on the exchange, there are no children under age five except those who are part of a sibling group that most likely includes pre-teens or a teenager.

Most children who are available for adoption are:

- between the ages of 6 and 18 years old
- part of a sibling group who need to stay together
- from diverse ethnic backgrounds
- children with emotional and behavioral difficulties

There are also many adults who, after becoming licensed as foster parents, wait indefinitely for foster children to be placed with their family. This may seem odd when, annually, more than 11,000 children need care from a nurturing foster family. Again, if prospective foster parents have a narrow range for the type of children they will accept into their family, their waiting time will most likely be longer.

Another reason parents may wait longer is because their personal needs may be different than the needs of their community. For example, some parents may be waiting to adopt from their county, while currently their county might not have any children waiting to be adopted. At the same time, the county might have a pressing need for foster families. In another county a prospective foster family may wait indefinitely for a foster child if

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### *May Is National Foster Care Month*

During May look around your region for information on foster care awareness. Over 300 public libraries will feature posters and table displays promoting foster parenting. Volunteers across the state will also be distributing foster care informational brochures at local grocery stores to help promote foster parenting.

the county has an abundance of experienced foster families and a limited number of foster children. Other counties may have a more immediate need for resource families—families who first serve as foster families, then help children as they transition back into their birth families, or later adopt them if reunification is not possible.

## *Expanding Your View of the Children*

If your desire to become a parent is greater than your need to get a specific child, you may want to look at how you can widen your comfort

zone and open your heart to children you might not have considered before.

### **Taking a Closer Look**

The reality is that all of the children from the foster care system will need a family to help them heal from their past. Most of these children live with pain from their early childhood, grief from their losses, anger, learning gaps, and social, emotional, and behavioral issues. Many will need help catching up in school and some may have more serious problems. Therese Langevin, adoptive parent and director of RS Eden Women's Program, says, "Adults who decide to care for a

child from the foster care system need to realize they are signing up to be a therapeutic family 24-7." Parents of these children will need to do whatever they can to try to help their child/children heal.

### **Analyzing the Kind of Child You Can Parent**

When adoptive and foster parents consider children they would want to include in their families, they need to look at their strengths. Some may feel they are talented helping children with physical disabilities, while others know they are gifted helping children with social and emotional problems. Other parents may have already successfully raised children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and are willing to foster or adopt children with ADHD. Some diagnoses such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) might overwhelm certain parents, while others who are willing to parent a child with FASD know they must surround themselves with support services and take each day one step at a time.

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## *Waiting for the Son of Her Dreams*



Thinking back 23 years ago when she was waiting to adopt a child, Mary Collins recalled a worker at Children's Home Society who asked parents to go home and dream of their child. Eager and obedient, Mary went home and dreamed of her son. Over time she had vivid dreams of him, sometimes clearly picturing his face. When CHS finally called with a referral, Mary was surprised to be offered a little girl, but she didn't let her dream son stop her from opening her heart to a different child. Over the years, more children—all from the foster care system—found their way into Mary's heart and home and she adopted three more girls and three boys.

Then one day Mary was sitting in a room filled with social workers and child protection advocates who were all trying to find the best family for two brothers who had been abused by their birth parents and foster parents. When the boys were escorted into the room, Mary gasped in recognition of the older boy.



**Destiny, Danté, Mary, Tomica, and Lamar Collins**

sending your good feelings and longing out into the universe so that it can return to you." Mary came from a family of nine children and now Lamar and his younger brother, Danté are her eighth and ninth children. She waited a long time to meet Lamar in person and while she waited, her life was full, rich, and filled with love for all her children.

"There he is!" she cried. Everyone was confused until she told them about her dream. More than anything, she says her life changed long ago when she allowed herself to dream and believe she could have a child. "I don't mean dreaming of the perfect child, but dreaming of the possibility of a child;

Most counties and agencies provide a checklist on which prospective parents check off the behaviors, diagnoses, and medical conditions they feel they will not be able to handle. Parker McDonald, who four years ago decided to adopt with his wife Meg, said recently, "There were a lot of things I checked off. Now, when I think back about that list, I realize we have handled most of the things I thought we couldn't."

There are a lot of parents in Minnesota who have adopted older children and sibling groups and have handled more than they ever thought possible. Think about where your individual talents or your strengths as a couple lie and look deeper at your capabilities and the children you might be able to help heal from their past.

Some prospective parents say they want a young child, and yet after they think about it, realize they have a special rapport with teenagers and decide maybe their place is to nurture teens, help them heal emotion-



## The Power of a Loving Bond



Anthony and Therese Langevin on vacation in British Columbia.

When Therese Langevin adopted Anthony, he left a therapeutic foster family that had cared for him for more than three years. They had many services already in place for him, helped him transition to his new family, coached Therese through her early months as a parent, and continue a loving relationship even now.

Therese knew Anthony had significant problems. Congenital deafness ran in Anthony's family and although he was not deaf, he didn't learn to talk until he was four and placed in his foster family. She also knew he had prenatal exposure to alcohol. Therese admits that when she attended the training to become an adoptive parent, she had her sights set on a younger child and most of what she heard or read about FASD frightened her. When she met Anthony, she fell in love with him. Not in a day or all at once, but Therese says, "When parents fall in love with their child, they make things work out. They learn what they have to do to make it work."

Early on Anthony taught Therese how to play a special game. He lay on a blanket, asked her to roll him up like a burrito, pull the blanket away from his face, and then read the pretend note in his hair from his birth mother asking Therese to take good care of him. Interestingly, the game provided Anthony with something his body requires: deep pressure sensory stimulation that is therapeutically helpful to children with FASD. It also gave him a chance to give himself as a gift to his mother and allowed her to receive him with joy over and over again.

ally and physically, and prepare them to enter the adult world with skills and confidence. All children eventually become teenagers, and if you are skilled with teens, think about starting where the need is great. Below are some questions to ask yourself:

→ What does it mean to be a therapeutic parent and am I willing to do it?

→ What qualities do I have that help me relate to older children or children with special needs?

→ What are my talents?

→ Who will support me?

→ How can I expand my network of support?

→ What am I willing to learn to help me parent children with special needs?

→ What will I do to get more experience parenting older children or children with special needs?

### Thinking about Different Parenting Options

If you have been waiting too long, you might want to think about other parenting options. For example, even when you know the need for permanent families is greater for older children, but you still want the experience of parenting younger children, you might want to consider becoming a foster parent, treatment foster parent, resource parent, or respite care provider. It is more likely that you will have the opportunity to parent younger children in one of these roles. Your role as a parent can be significant and meaningful to you and the children in your care, even if it is not necessarily permanent.

Descriptions of those roles are:

**Foster families** commit to loving and caring for children for various lengths of time. Sometimes children

## Single Study Helps Foster Parents Adopt

In the past, adoptive parents and foster parents were seen as providing distinctly different services. When parental rights were terminated and foster children became available for adoption, foster parents were not allowed to adopt the children in their care. Then, professionals began to see that many foster parents were not only highly committed to permanency, but were also strong candidates for adoption because they had already established a deep relationship with the foster children in their families.

Minnesota used to require two separate home studies, one for foster care and one for adoption. This policy made it more lengthy and repetitive for foster parents who wanted to adopt a foster child, because they had to take the time to be approved for an adoption home study. In February 2003, the state policy was changed to require one home study process to apply both to foster care and to adoption. This new practice creates consistency throughout the state and ensures that no agency has to duplicate efforts to find permanent families for children.

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Leo, Chrystal, Christine, and Antonio Dondlinger



## Open Your Heart

Christine and Leo Dondlinger adopted two children, Chrystal and Antonio. When Christine and Leo first saw Antonio featured on channel 5's *Thursday's Child*, they knew they wanted to adopt him. They were aware of his cerebral palsy when they adopted him at 8 years old, but they didn't know he had other significant learning problems. After Antonio joined their family, Christine and Leo explored the reasons behind his learning problems and discovered he was autistic. The Dondlingers have risen to the challenges of parenting a child with special needs and are tireless advocates for both Antonio and Chrystal.

When asked what she might say to parents who are tentative about expanding their view of the type of children they feel they can parent, Christine says, "You have proven you've got a heart big enough to take a child into your family. So open your heart and let your heart guide you to be more open to other children. Don't limit yourself, go ahead and look at other children. Maybe your heart will see possibilities where your mind won't."

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under eight need foster parents and as a foster parent, you might have the opportunity to care for younger children until they can be returned to their birth parents or relatives. If reunification is not possible with birth parents or relatives, foster parents would be encouraged to adopt.

**Treatment foster families** provide temporary care to foster children. They receive extensive training to help them provide integrated treatment services to children who have severe problems.

**Resource families** provide immediate foster care to children, many of

whom are eight or younger. At the same time they are also part of a team who actively works toward reunifying children with their birth families. In addition, resource parents commit to the possibility of adoption if reunification cannot take place.

A resource parent's primary role is to care for the children while their parents get their lives in order and prepare to resume their role as parents. They mentor the birth parents to help them reunify with their children. Only if it becomes clear that reunification is not possible with birth parents or relatives and parental rights are terminated, do

resource parents begin the adoption process. Resource parents need to develop additional supports and resources to help them maintain that keen balance between their roles of fostering, mentoring and and adopting.

Younger children are cared for by foster parents and resource parents, but there is never a guarantee of adoption. Reunification with the birth family is the primary goal

and adoption is only recommended after all resources for uniting the children to their extended birth families are exhausted.

**Respite care providers** take care of other birth, foster and adoptive parents' children to allow the parents to take a short break or have extended time away from their children.

Respite care providers care for children at regularly scheduled times on an hourly basis, for a weekend, or even a week. They get a chance to see what it is like to provide 24-hour care to children and have the added luxury of taking time to reflect upon the successes and the challenges of the visit. Respite care providers offer a needed service to birth, foster, and adoptive families, but also receive great training for future full-time parenting.

Whatever you decide to do needs to fit with who you are and what your goals are. If you have been waiting for a long time you might want to ask yourself if you are being too particular, if your needs match with your county's or agency's needs, or if the child you want to parent will be realistically available within a reasonable amount of time. You may want to look beyond an unattainable ideal child and explore becoming a parent to the children who have been waiting a long time for a family to nurture and love them.

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This is the fourth in a series of newsletters for Minnesota prospective foster and adoptive parents produced by the North American Council on Adoptable Children's Minnesota Recruitment Project, funded through a grant by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

We encourage you to reproduce and distribute this newsletter.

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