

While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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Foster and Adopted Preteens and Teens Speak Out

As you wait, think about the children and youth who will become part of your family. Think about how your family will feel to them and how you can make a possibly difficult transition easier by keeping an open mind and planning how you will take them in. As a prospective parent, you have the luxury of being secure in your own home while you think about taking in a new family member, but when children wait they are:

- living in a temporary residence
- facing uncertainty as they anticipate leaving everything they have known for the unknown
- preparing to leave their current home, friends, neighborhood, and school
- feeling afraid even though they have longed for a forever family

This issue of *While You Wait* features thoughts and opinions from foster and adopted preteens and teens. We hope their perspective and advice will help you as you prepare to welcome young people into your family.

When asked what it was like to wait for a family, Kaayla, who was adopted at 10, explains, "You don't fantasize—you just worry. You worry about whether they'll like you or not." Brandon, adopted at 12, adds, "It's a long wait and you start to feel anxious. You want a family to come faster, but then you wonder whether you are going to fit in with these new parents and what they are like." Talon, Kaayla's younger brother, says, "Sometimes it goes slow and sometimes it goes fast, sometimes you feel good—you're getting a new home and you know it's your forever home. Sometimes it feels bad because you don't want to get pulled away from your mom and then all of a sudden you start crying." Kaayla, Brandon, and Talon are like thousands of other children from foster care who know what it is like to wait for a family or to make the difficult transition to a new family.

One easy way to welcome a new child is to "ask what they like to eat homemade-wise," suggests Talon, and then make it for them or take them to their favorite restaurant.

Kaayla offers this advice: "New parents should visit the places where kids have lived before, like their school, their mall, and stuff." She also thinks it is a good idea for you to display pictures of the kids that show them doing things with other people before they joined your family. "Take pictures of their foster families and have them around too," she adds.

When Larnell joined the foster family that later became his adoptive family, he said he could tell they wanted him there: "They didn't treat me differently than any other kid in their family. They didn't treat me any differently than their own kid. That's the cool thing about it."



Complimenting his mom who adopted him when he was 17, Larnell says:

For one, she wasn't scared and she wasn't intimidated by me being a teenager. She understood that I wasn't fully grown, but I also wasn't a child. She just saw me as a young man.

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Nine Qualities Found in Successful Foster and Adoptive Parents

The following nine qualities (which have been adapted from the work of Linda Katz) are often found in many successful foster and adoptive parents. Sometimes professionals look for these characteristics when they recruit prospective parents. Take the time to note the qualities that you may already have and learn why they are important. Then, strive to acquire or strengthen those you need to work on to help you be a successful foster or adoptive parent.

Successful foster and adoptive parents:

1. Are able to find happiness with small steps toward improvement. Rather than focusing on end goals and remaking their children, successful parents see their role as helping their children achieve success in small steps, beginning with daily tasks. These parents live in the present and help their children achieve each measurable task. They do not dwell on the future or pressure themselves or the children to reach some final outcome. They celebrate small successes with their children and help them appreciate the accumulative effect of each effort.

2. Refuse to be rejected by their child and are able to delay gratification of parental needs. Successful parents persist in their role as parents in the face of rejection by the child. Children with difficult pasts, especially older children and teens, often push away those who try to get close to them. A successful parent sees this behavior as a survival tactic to prevent any adult from disappointing, hurting, or rejecting them. Successful parents are stubborn, and refuse to accept that the final outcome of their relationship will be rejection by their child. They are also able to put their own needs on hold and postpone the rewards of parenting for weeks, months, and even years. They do not take the initial rejection from the child personally and understand that it has to do with the child's past disappointments, fears, and traumas. They see themselves as therapeutic parents and are willing to wait out and work through rejection, help the child heal, and slowly build an intimate, trusting relationship.

3. Are tolerant of their own ambivalence and/or strong negative feelings. Children from the foster care system—especially older children with special needs—often come to their foster and adoptive families with deep pain from their past, destructive behaviors, and more. These children tend to draw out powerful negative feelings in their foster and adoptive parents—often parallel to what the children themselves feel. Successful foster and adoptive parents are able to feel these negative feelings, process them, and separate out those that are coming from the child. They do not judge themselves harshly for feeling anger, are able to feel anger

and not act on it, and know their feelings will pass. These adults are also able to use humor to defuse their reactive emotions and can talk about their feelings with other parents, therapists, or workers.

4. Maintain parental role flexibility. One factor distinguishing successful adopters of older children is the ability of one parent to perceive the signs of burnout in another parent and move into the caregiving role while the stressed out parent recovers. An established pattern of role flexibility greatly increases a family's likelihood for success, as one partner is relieved from absorbing all the emotional battering. Single parents can find similar results when they:

- build a network of support through membership in a foster or adoptive parent group
- find friends who can listen and offer informal breaks from parenting responsibilities
- establish a working relationship with respite care providers who can give them formal parenting breaks

5. Have a systems view of their family. Families that tend to label one person as the problem or look for the "good guy" and the "villain" in a situation tend to scapegoat family members. When parents view the family as a system—with complicated interrelated relationships among all members—they tend to look more deeply at reasons behind behavior, sibling difficulties, and interaction with parents, etc., and look for ways improve relationships. These parents are willing to look at how each member affects another and tend to mobilize all their resources to better cope with a new foster or adopted child.

6. Take charge of their parental role. Parents who succeed are able to quickly make the transition from a tentative parental stance to full "ownership" of their role as parents and incorporate the child's many differences and history into their family. Their own comfort in being a parent helps them overcome any unusual circumstances or irregularities and they are able to take charge of the relationship. Just as parents of newborns begin by acting like a parent and then transform into parents, so do successful foster and adoptive parents. Taking charge of the parental role does not mean domination, rather it means taking the initiative for the relationship, setting boundaries and limits, meeting the child's needs, nurturing, and establishing the groundwork to build intimacy.

7. Insist on developing an immediate relationship with the child. Successful parents of older foster and adopted children know they have a limited time

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Larnell lived in several foster families before he was adopted. He admits he tended to be reclusive and hang out in his room—like many teenagers do. Some people misinterpreted his behavior, and described him as “sneaky” and “untrustworthy.”

His adoptive mother was able to allow him to take the time he needed to come out of his room and learn to interact with other family members.

Larnell thought about how his mom was able to successfully draw him out and adds, “It’s hard to explain how to do that. It just takes a good heart and good character to do that. I think what my mom has done—I don’t think you can get that in training. For one, she wasn’t scared and she wasn’t intimidated by me being a teenager. She understood that I wasn’t fully grown, but I also wasn’t a child. She just saw me as a young man.”

In contrast, Larnell also talked about a foster family that didn’t work out for him: “Even though they thought they were being fair by doing all this whoop-de-do stuff like buying us things, they weren’t fair. They fed me different food—like what was left over. They talked



about me right in front of me, and they judged me and my friends.”

Older children have formed personalities and a past that will always be a part of them. Many foster children have siblings or other relatives that are very important to them and need foster and adoptive families who will respect and honor those relationships and their past. Like Larnell, many teens said they are uncomfortable when families seem to want to re-make them to fit in with the rest of the family.

Cassandra, who is 14 and one day hopes to be adopted, chose to remain with her brother rather than staying with an adoptive family when that family decided they could no longer handle her brother. It was hard for her to leave that family but even harder for her to imagine being separated from her brother.

Cassandra talked about some things that can hurt a foster child deeply. In one foster home, for example, she felt bad when her school picture was not displayed with the rest of the children’s school pictures.

“In another foster home, I was on the honor roll and everthing and no one in the family even complimented me,” says Cassandra.

Many teens remember being asked to sit on the sidelines so their foster family could take a family photo. Not only does this feel awkward and embarrassing, but it’s hard for kids to feel like they’re part of the family when they’re left out like that.

Thinking about what it is like for her when she enters a new family, Sharniece, who is waiting to be adopted, says, “I think when a kid comes into your home, parents should act like themselves. I don’t think they should be all cheesey.”

Nichole chimes in, “That’s right, be who you are right away. Don’t act as if you feel one way when you really feel another way. If a family lives in clutter and mess, don’t hide it or clean it up for visits. Show

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Nine Qualities Found in Successful Foster and Adoptive Parents, continued

frame to turn things around for the child. They don’t have time to hold back and wait for the relationship to develop. Effective parents are active and do what parents of infants and toddlers do—“they assume control, try to anticipate behaviors, interrupt behavior-spirals early, provide a great deal of praise, positive reinforcement, and physical affection...[they] take the lead in the relationship and are not deterred by the child’s protest or withdrawal” (Jernberg, 1979). These parents can appear intrusive but in a caring way. They make up for lost time and try to establish contact and intrude much like parents of infants do by making eye contact and body closeness to build intimacy and trust.

8. Practice self-care and use humor. Parents who master a balanced lifestyle, including incorporating

self-care strategies and humor into their daily lives, are able to establish a healthy pattern and refuse to accept martyrdom as the price of parenting. Regular evenings and occasional weekends away help parents gain perspective, regroup, and come back to the family with renewed energy.

9. Operate in an open versus closed family system. When families decide to foster or adopt children with special needs, they need to be open to accepting help from a number of sources: other parents, teachers, therapists, social workers, etc. Successful families see receiving help from people outside the family unit as an asset instead of a threat.



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who you are right away. I can accept that. I don't like it when families try to hide things about themselves."

Nichole also believes parents should be prepared to explain how the world works to kids because many foster kids don't know. She explains, "My adoptive mom showed me how action equals reaction: If you do your work, you get your credits, if you get your credits, you can graduate, if you graduate, you can get a better job. She showed me futuristically where I will get by what I do."

Thinking about schoolwork, Dee adds that he thinks parents should plan for how they will help with homework or check out where to find tutors for their kids. Many foster kids have learning gaps for many reasons and need homework support.

Another tip: Most kids don't like surprises. They want to know how to succeed with a family. "Go over the rules right away and tell kids what to do in certain situations," says Brandon. Cassandra says she wishes more families would tell all their rules ahead of time so kids don't accidentally break one. "It's embarrassing to get caught breaking a rule you didn't know existed," she says.

Sharniece offers another piece of advice: "I don't think [parents] should take kids places right away either. They should just let kids relax. Let them get to know the house first and let them get comfortable."

Jessica, who was adopted at 11, agrees that it is hard to meet new people all at once. She says, "Parents should collect pictures of their [extended] family and let the kids look at the pictures and choose who they want to meet first."

"Don't be taking them out to meet other relatives right away and show them 'your daughter.' I don't like it when they say 'my daughter'," adds Sharniece.

While Sharniece and Jessica need more time to adjust to a new home, Nichole, an outgoing 16-year-old, says, "I like that when they say 'my daughter'—it makes me feel wanted. And I like Red Lobster too. If they're willing to take me there, I'm ready to go!"

They all have legitimate points, which puts the responsibility back on the parent to talk to each child and find out what will make each one feel the most comfortable.

As a parent you are never going to know all of the worries a child might have, but you can follow Alisha's advice: "Sit down and talk to them. They'll talk and listen."

"Don't interrupt or tell the kid to be quiet," says Brandon. "Especially when the child is trying to make a conversation."

Jessica concludes: "And always tell the truth."

Waiting

by Nichole

*I wait, wait—
wait for sorrow to override,
wait for the sun to brighten the sky.
I wait, wait—
wait to gain a family of my own
only to call a place my home.
I wait, wait—
wait for a friend to come who never does,
treated as if I was shunned.
I wait, wait—
wait for a car that never stops
the weather that never changes
the friend who is never there
and the family who is never patient
I wait.
Tick-tock tick-tock
I wait
continuously wait.*

The photos in this issue are by Pam Hasegawa. The photos are not pictures of the youth who are featured in this publication.

This is the fifth 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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