

Why Foster Care Is Messy, Difficult ... And Totally Worth It

As our nation marks National Foster Care Month in May, it's an opportunity to share my family's unique experience inside this ministry of loving on children and their families in crisis. Key word being *unique*—as in, “being the only one of its kind; unlike anything else.”

Since America's foster care movement began in 1853, it has had many different faces. To shed some light on this ministry, I want to clarify that this is *one family's story*. Just because you read this article does not mean you will understand all fostering families.

Fostering families and each child they care for are as unique an experience as someone's marriage, or a mother's labor stories between her different children. Because circumstances within fostering are so “case by case,” your experience will not be identical to any other.

Foster care is an intense subject. It's not beautifully packaged, not even well-thought-of among many in our society ... *yet*. One of my husband and my dreams is for foster care to become as normal and accepted a ministry in the Christian world as adoption has become.

When my husband and I had talked about adopting, the responses were: “Oh wow, that's so exciting!” “It's going to be an incredible journey!” However, when we talked about fostering to friends, the responses were: “Why?? Aren't you afraid of the type of children that will come into your home?” “Really? Don't you want to wait until you have children of your own?” “I could never do that and then give them back.”

I get it. *I really do*. It's different.

We care for children as long as the government says we can. A judge decides or approves our schedule for biological visits, vacations, speech therapy appointments, doctor visits, play therapy, *Guardian Ad Litem* visits and Department of Human Resource visits.

We are licensed through a private foster care agency that helps us navigate the maze of this world while keeping us up-to-date on all our yearly legal records, continuing education credits, paperwork, etc.

The goal of foster care is reunification. We are actually treating this as a ministry to heal and reunite families. These children have real families that are in crisis. They are not orphans in the literal sense, though I would passionately argue that they feel the emotional ramifications of the term.

Our role as foster parents is to take in, care for and love on children *and* minister to their families. We pray for biological families, love on them and share Jesus with them—when or if we are given the chance.

We do not get to make a lot of decisions outside of those roles. The court decides if and when it is safe for the child to return to his biological family. The court tells us when the child is to leave our home or stay.

Our job is to try to make their biological family a different, “more full of light” place to go back to once/if reunification happens. Glamorous it is not. And really messy. Worth it? Well, I know it is.

Your reaction right about now is, *Oh, I couldn't do that*. And my painfully candid response to you is: *If you can't, then who will?* I've had close, personal friends grow up in foster care and I won't go into the devastating details. Suffice to say, there are people who will foster with the wrong intentions.

I've heard so often that you must "feel called" to it—like a life-calling you put on as an occupation that brings you joy. Well, I'm probably going to make some people upset. It is a calling, but it isn't *that kind* of calling. I don't think it's as black-and-white as that. (And I am the *queen* of the "black and white" mindset; just ask my grey-minded, let's-analyze-every-perspective husband.)

A family considering foster care needs to understand the circumstances they will be entering, they need to be extremely committed in their decision to foster ... and flexible. But here is where some people are going to be upset with me: *You have already been called to it.*

You know from hearing the vision of fostering that you will see a child process suffering and pain, and being part of that process will cost you those same emotions ... maybe more. And your response is that you do not want to enter their suffering or their loss. "It's too hard," you say to yourself. "Especially emotionally."

I respect those feelings; I assure you, I truly do. But let's consider a better question. Would it change anything for you to know that these children will feel suffering and pain without a loving family that can hold their hand through it ... or better yet, feel it with them?

"For to this you were called, because Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21).

God already called you. That verse does not just refer to foster care. Many ministries will cost you suffering and pain: praying with post-abortive women, rescuing and restoring sex trafficking victims, counseling at a crisis pregnancy center, caring for widows, feeding the poor and others.

Don't let your suffering be an excuse to never try an impactful ministry for a season of your life.

Just as Jesus suffered for us because we were worth it to Him, we are called to enter into suffering *along with Him* because His children are worth it too. Jesus is our example and we are called to follow in His steps.

I'm writing about foster care because I know there are incredible families out there scared to take this step. You may have even thought about it before, but you hear those lies: *You couldn't ever do it. It's too hard. It would hurt too much.* I'm humbly asking you to pray about it as a family.

The children and families you could impact are waiting to see someone represent Jesus to them. They never thought they were worth it; you are going to prove them wrong by your love.

The Holy Spirit will equip you with love that overflows, and He will make up for all the holes you don't know how to fill for them. You do not have the responsibility to "fix" or "heal" them. That is Jesus' job.

As the church, I pray we move forward in recruiting and training Christian couples involved in foster care to love children and minister to families in crisis.

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