

Kids Who Fall Through the Cracks

Thousands of American children are caught in the foster care system. But Christians are working hard to place them in loving homes.

America has been redefining the family for decades. Like food and fashion, the model family rises and falls with the latest cultural trends. Marriage is in, marriage is out. Divorce is applauded, cohabitation is cool. From teenage moms to deadbeat dads, traditional values are no longer vogue, and now we're entertaining same-sex marriage.

But in all the rage, there should be outrage. For more than half a million American kids, family life is something that changes with the seasons. They are the children of foster care, lost in a confusing world of strangers, counselors and court battles. Many have languished in the system for years, transferred from home to home and school to school while their parents try to iron out their issues.

Many foster children have been abused, neglected or abandoned. Some have parents who are imprisoned, deceased or too ill to care for them. And among them, as many as 117,000 are available for adoption, while others live in a state of limbo, unsure from day to day if they will ever go back home.

Lori Cohee knows the feeling. One day when she was 12 years old, she was suddenly whisked away from her Napa Valley, California, school in a police car. School officials had reported an allegation against her family. Frightened and confused, the girl was taken to a county office for questioning, where her every word was recorded.

Afterward, she was delivered to her first foster home. "I basically went to a stranger's home with only the clothes on my back," she recalls.

That was the beginning of a transient life for her. Like a wandering refugee, Lori was placed and displaced in six different homes over the next few years. "Before I knew what happened, I lost everything I knew as a child," she says.

At age 14, she was subpoenaed to testify about the allegations in court, but she refused. "I would rather have died than to testify," she says. "I would be the one to put [my family member] in jail."

That night, Lori ended up in the hospital, begging doctors to save her life after she attempted suicide. The young girl survived, the charges were reduced, and her abuser was given probation.

Lori's story is not uncommon. And because of the trauma many foster children experience, they are often riddled with feelings of guilt and rejection. To guard their hearts, they may bury their feelings, become secretive or even suffer from attachment disorder.

"They grieve a lot," says Lynn Stephens, 50. As parents of two grown children, Lynn and Steve began bringing foster kids into their quiet home in Clinton, Illinois, in 1997. What began as respite care has resulted in the Stephens' adopting four foster children.

Their eldest son Jim, now 18, asked to go into foster care

when he was 12 because his mother neglected him. He lived in three foster homes before moving in with the Stephens. “He was only supposed to stay for 14 days,” the Stephens say with a grin.

Other foster kids came for a time, and eventually a sibling group of three was permanently added to the Stephens family. Jim says the best part of being adopted is being loved and secure at home. But he still struggles with acceptance in society, he says.

He attributes it to racism—Jim is part Hispanic in a mostly white community—but like many foster kids he may be experiencing a type of prejudice that’s rarely talked about. Many are ostracized in their own communities because the label “foster child” carries a strong stigma.

The Foster Care Challenge

Not all foster children are “troubled,” but any child who’s been removed from his home needs special care to help him adjust to the trauma and his new environment. Unfortunately, difficult behaviors are sometimes part of the package, which only reinforces the stigma.

“[The children] are traumatized, and sometimes the system contributes to their troubled behavior,” says Karen Jorgenson of National Foster Parent Association in Gig Harbor, Washington. “But understanding their trauma helps foster parents help the kids.”

Still, patterns of abuse are sometimes hard to break.

At a family gathering in one foster home, a young daughter stripped herself naked in front of all the relatives. Needless to say, everyone was appalled, but the foster parents later discovered that this ritual was expected of the child when she lived with her abusive parents.

“All [foster] kids have been put into situations where they don’t have much choice,” one foster mom says, “but people treat them like they’re losers.”

For example, the catchphrase “It takes a special person to do that”—heard by all foster and adoptive parents at one time or another—is meant to be a compliment. But sometimes it rubs people the wrong way because the underlying attitude presumes that parenting these children is more of a project than a relationship—or that they never really become part of the family.

By the time Lori was 15, she was being moved to her sixth foster home. When she arrived at the house, she was greeted by a mother, a father, two brothers and two sisters. “That’s exactly what I had lost [in my family],” she says.

Some foster parents she’d stayed with were less than loving. Some didn’t celebrate birthdays or holidays, and others went weeks without talking to her, she recalls. “I felt like I was there to help them pay their rent,” she says.

But Steve and Jackie Danner’s home was different. It was a refuge.

“I never tried to replace their mom,” Jackie says, “but my foster kids were treated exactly like my own, and they can all

tell you that.”

“They were the most beautiful Christian people I had ever met in my entire life,” Lori raves. “They saved me. I still love them with all my heart.”

“You live by example,” Jackie says. “I always reassured [Lori] that God was there.”

Lori lived with the Danners until she graduated from high school, but she was only one of 73 foster children who passed through their home over many years. “I loved the challenge of helping them,” Jackie says.

Lori is now 36, married, and a mother of two, but she’s still close to Jackie. When she accepted Christ as her Savior at the age of 24, Lori couldn’t wait to tell Jackie.

“We cried together,” Jackie says. And now, through God’s power, Lori has also forgiven and mended ways with her biological family, she says.

A Parenting Shortage

Although traditional orphanages are all but obsolete in the United States, thousands of kids do live in emergency shelters, group homes and even psychiatric units in hospitals because there simply aren’t enough foster homes, Jorgenson says.

“We’d rather have homes waiting for children than children

waiting for homes," she says.

The stigma contributes to the shortage. Even Christians who genuinely love children and want to make a difference have legitimate fears about foster parenting (see related article on the next page).

Money is also an issue. The stipend provided by the state is an expense account for the child, not a paycheck for the foster parents. So as the economy draws more mothers into the work force, fewer moms are available at home to take care of children.

Dona Abbott, administrative director at Bethany Christian Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan, says the geographical distance between extended family members hinders couples' availability to care for foster kids. "The relative support network isn't there," she says.

It can also be hard to work with the system. One East Coast social worker said caseworkers are trained to look for child abuse, even among foster parents, so sometimes they tend not to empathize with them: "They have a mandate to work with the birth family, so they don't see working with the foster families as their role."

Another problem is the vast racial discrepancy. Minority children are over-represented in the foster care system, but racially matching foster families are under-represented.

And among the pool of trained, willing families there's an interesting twist. Because children have been trapped in the

system for years on end, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997, mandating that permanent placement be found for kids who have been in care for more than 15 of the last 22 months. States that don't comply risk losing funding.

This translates to more families adopting the kids in their care, which often leaves them unable or unwilling to take in more foster kids. According to the latest data (2000) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human services, foster parents adopted 65 percent of the 36,000 foster children who were adopted in 1998.

"It forces foster parents to make a decision," Jorgenson says. "If that's the best place for the child, it's good." But if a child's birth family needs additional time to get back on their feet, an appeal process is sometimes in order, she says.

Kent Dunn, ministry representative at Illini Children's Christian Home Ministries (ICCHM) in St. Joseph, Illinois, says although the primary goal of foster care continues to be reuniting the child with the birth family, if that's not possible, then guardianship or kinship care is pursued. "That protects their ethnicity, their culture and their identity," Dunn says.

If that is not feasible, adoption is the next step. "One of the rights of a child is to have a relationship that lasts a lifetime," he says.

ICCHM, a private agency supported solely through donations, is a rare find. All its placements are voluntary, and referrals come from churches and Christian counselors rather than the state. "We work directly with the family," Dunn says. ICCHM is

affiliated with the Christian Church and Churches of Christ.

The Cry of the Orphan

Foster parenting is not for everyone. According to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, foster parents committed more than 5,100 incidents of child abuse or neglect in 2001. Because of the special needs of foster children and the requirements imposed by state laws, fostering is different from “normal” parenting in some ways.

It's family-to-family ministry. All members of the immediate family should be in unity about providing foster care, especially both spouses. “The best foster parents are the ones that see themselves as giving into the life of not only the child, but his or her family,” Abbott says.

It's lifestyle evangelism. Foster care is a great opportunity to share the gospel with a child and his family through day-to-day living. “The intent of a good foster parent is to care for and nurture children,” Dunn says. That can include religious training, as long as the birth parents do not object.

It's a commitment. Unconditional love breeds security. Even birth children can make parents want to “send them back” sometimes. “You think, Yeah, but nobody would really do that with a birth child,” Lynn Stephens says. “But that's exactly why there are so many foster children! Parents abandon them, whether it's physically or emotionally.”

It's temporary. “It's a commitment to make a difference in the child's life for a short time,” Abbott says. Though many

children do end up being adopted by their foster parents, that shouldn't be the primary reason for fostering. "It's not a 'try before you buy' situation," Lynn Stephens says. "If nothing else, you can provide protection for a brief period of their life."

It's active. Paperwork, home studies, counseling, therapy, court dates, and last-minute appointments with social services and birth parents all are included. If your family schedule is already overbooked, you'll need to lighten the load to make time for another child.

It's hospitality. "Don't do it because you want playmates for your kids," Jorgenson says. The incoming child will need a lot of love and attention. "People must really enjoy welcoming children—and strangers—into their home," Abbott says. "And really receive joy from helping that child."

"Many foster parents want to make a difference in the life of a child," Jorgenson says, "and they say it's their mission and it's a calling from God to help take care of the children."

Others believe it's an act of obedience.

"If you're willing, God would choose a lot of people to do it," says foster-adoptive mom, Annette Hoch of Holmen, Wisconsin. "Jesus said to take care of the widows and the orphans," she exhorts. "Rather than just thinking about it, we should act on it."

Christians have a responsibility to care for orphans, whether they need temporary or permanent homes, says Doug Martin of FamilyLife in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Christian

organization recently launched a new initiative called Hope for the Orphans, which has an overall goal to amplify the cry of the orphan to the body of Christ.

“Pour yourselves into the lives of orphans who need believers,” says Martin, who directs FamilyLife’s new If You Were Mine adoption workshops at churches nationwide. “God’s going to call some to adopt, some to foster care, some to give financially, some to be a Big Brother or Sister,” Martin says. “The biggest issue couples need to get over is, ‘Am I available to be obedient to what God calls me to do?’”

It Takes a Village

Lori left her well-paying job to establish Foster a Dream in Benicia, California. It’s not a placement agency but a support network for kids already in the system. “There’s got to be a community of support because the foster parent can’t do it all,” Lori says. “It takes a village to raise a child, just in normal circumstances.”

“Foster A Dream has made a strong mark in the communities in which it serves [Northern California Bay area] and will continue to do so with your assistance,” writes California state Sen. Wesley Chesbro in a letter of recommendation.

In addition to outreaches such as trips, holiday gifts and a pillow giveaway, Lori is currently raising funds for a mentoring program that would match foster children with community volunteers. “It’s more than Sally and Suzy go out for ice cream,” she says. “The role of our mentors will be the guiding source to help foster children successfully enter the adult world.”

Mentoring is also a good way to test the waters before diving into foster care, Lori says.

Like any committed relationship, foster parenting has no guarantees and it's nothing less than a sacred journey of faith. "What do you know about missions until you go?" Steve Stephens asks. "You're responding to God's call."

And if you ask Stephens what he gets out of raising a second family, he's at a loss for words. "What do you get from having birth kids?" he rebounds. "You love them."

Should You Be a Foster Parent?

Don't let fear stop you. Here are some myths that stop parents from taking in foster kids.

Even Christians who want to help children have reservations about foster care. In fact, Christian professionals say you should receive prayer, counsel and training first if you believe God is stirring you to consider becoming a foster parent.

Common concerns about foster parenting that might be familiar to you include:

Bringing another child into our home will disrupt our family.

"Absolutely," says Dona Abbott, administrator for Bethany Christian Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "Any change in the family will cause disruption, but you have to work with it."

She suggests giving each child a private place to keep his or her treasures. Pay attention to the personality and needs of your own family, and make decisions about needs based on how they might affect and complement your kids.

A troubled child might be a bad influence on our own kids.

Abbott advises: "If your own child has had healthy, solid parenting all his life, generally they don't mimic the behaviors of the child that's been abused and neglected."

Fostering is a "whole family" ministry. "A lot of [parents] do it because they've been successful in raising their own children, and they want to get their children involved in helping someone else," Abbott says.

But it can backfire. She advises training for every member of the family and recommends Making Room in Your Family—a popular, child-friendly workshop and booklet by the National Foster Parent Association. To inquire, contact your local foster care agency, or for materials, call 800-777-6636.

It's dangerous to mix unrelated boys and girls in the same home.

Parents can make choices about the age and gender of the children they bring into their home. Along with stable supervision, they must set firm, literal boundaries. For example, in many foster homes, boys and girls are not allowed in one another's bedrooms.

****It would break my heart to see the foster children leave.** That's the most common reaction, but is it a valid reason to decline the opportunity to show God's love to a child? "There will be pain, and when we attach, it should hurt to let go," Abbott says.

"It's not about me anymore," says seasoned foster mom Ellen Houston of Memphis, Tennessee. Ellen and her husband, John, have cared for 19 foster children over the last nine years, and they still cry when the kids leave. "Everything we do is to help somebody else," she says, "and we get a great joy out of being with them."

We want to have our own children. Jeff and Annette Hoch of Holmen, Wisconsin, have a uniquely blended family of five girls. A girl adopted internationally and twins adopted from foster care are sandwiched between two birth children, ages 12 and 1. And along the way the Hochs have cared for 10 foster kids.

"God creates families all ways," Annette says. "To me, it doesn't matter how God brings the children. If He brings them, they're mine."

It's important not only to treat foster kids like your own, she says, but also to see them as yours in your heart or you may resent them for imposing on your family. "If you think of them as a guest in your home, you'll find more fault with them," she adds.

"You have to guard yourself and your own children," Annette advises, "but you have to go in with the mind-set that you're going to love them no matter what."

A Place to Call Home

Minority kids wait the longest of all foster children to be adopted.

Tucked into an average neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee, is a not-so-average family. Walk in their front door and you can tell something's different. What was the living room has been converted into an oversized dining room, and the garage has been converted into an indoor play area for a crowd of kids who have been converted into a family.

John and Ellen Houston not only have cared for 19 foster children since 1995, but they also have adopted three of them. In addition to their three grown biological kids, they also enjoy the company of 11 grandchildren when they visit. John is pastor of a local church nearby, and Ellen has been in kids ministry for years.

"My whole goal," says Ellen, 51, "was to reach the young people that the church did not want to fool with."

The Houstons, named Foster Parents of the Year (2000) by Porter Leath Children's Center in Memphis, are a minority—not because they're African American—but because there's a vast shortage of racially matching foster parents, even though ethnic children make up 63 percent of foster kids overall, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) figures for 2001.

"The most significant and independent predictors of how long these children wait for permanent placement are their age at the time they enter care and their race or ethnicity," states the DHHS Web site. Six years after entering care, African-American children's likelihood of being adopted is only one-fifth that of white children.

In minority communities, says Dona Abbot of Bethany Christian

Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan, people more readily take in their friends' and relatives' children informally when the need arises.

"They don't know the support that's involved in foster care, that it's a team effort," says Preta Hodges, clinical services manager at Porter Leath. Training, financial assistance and counseling are available through state and local agencies.

Others are simply unaware of the need. Hodges says Memphis has seen an increase in African-American foster families since they've begun informing the public. "They're more willing when they know the need," she says.

In an effort to bring faster resolve into kids' lives, The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act was enacted in 1994, mandating that race or ethnicity cannot be a factor in preventing a child from being placed in a home, temporarily or permanently. But in the past, according to DHHS, efforts to expand the pool of minority foster and adoptive parents faltered.

Meanwhile the clock is ticking for kids in the foster care system, and until states achieve a greater diversity of foster families, more transcultural placements will be seen.

That doesn't sit well with some families who are concerned that ethnic kids may lose their sense of cultural identity. But according to DHHS, kids in transcultural homes generally do as well as others with regard to self-esteem, behavior and achievement tests.

The Houstons, who have fostered as many as 10 children at once, have kept kids of all colors, including a Caucasian boy

who lived with them for three years.

“We teach them that we are all the same, to love one another equally,” Ellen says. “They’re all just God’s children.”

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