

It's All Relative: Supporting Kinship Connections

Keeping Kyrie: Fostering and Adopting Medically Fragile Children

Nathan and I both considered fostering before we ever met each other. He has a big heart and wants to help. I was a counselor and worked in inpatient units where we couldn't discharge children because they had no foster placement to go home to, but it wasn't clinically appropriate to keep them inpatient. I finally realized I couldn't keep complaining about the situation if I wasn't doing something to help solve it.

We talked about all this before we were married, and then we decided to commit to it. We filled out the application to be foster parents while we were on our honeymoon! It took us 1 year to get approved.

That year turned out to be a big one for us. We had several miscarriages, and, ultimately, we found out we would not be able to have children. We were so grateful we had already made the decision to foster.

We fostered 87 children in 4 years. It was intense. Some of them came and stayed for a long time, a few only stayed a few hours, and some came and left and came back again. Nothing has ever been so hard or so exhausting, but I wouldn't change a moment of it. We learned so much and loved so much! There were all kinds of challenges—and a handful of children who weren't too fond of us—but mostly we all learned together and really appreciated one another. We loved watching families progress, heal, and be reunited, and there are many families we are still in contact with through social media. It was always hard to say goodbye to the children, but it was worth it to watch them say hello again to their own families.

The first was Alex, who came to us when he was 4, with long red curls all the way down his back. He was picked up at the casino. He had been left alone in his parent's car while they were inside. He only had the pair of shorts he was wearing, and after we brought him home he slept for 3 days. He didn't know how to use utensils, or sleep in a bed, or use the restroom inside because they had mostly been homeless. He repeated everything we said, ran around on his tip toes, and flapped his arms in the air anytime he got excited. Getting an official autism diagnosis gave us access to good services that have helped a lot, and there is a purity about his spirit that brings much joy to our family.

Anber came next, and she was also picked up from the casino. She was locked in the trunk of the car while her mother was inside prostituting. She didn't even have a diaper and came wrapped in a towel. We weren't sure how old she was for the first 2 weeks we had her, but they told us she was probably 11 months old by the teeth she had. She had Rickett's from not being fed enough, and her legs were the shape of her car seat. We could fit a basketball between her knees when she walked. She also had reactive attachment disorder, so that she stiffened when we picked her up and tried to hold her. She would take the bottle from us and not let us touch it, even burping herself when she was finished by pounding herself in the chest. She has come a long way and has a very sweet spirit, but she still does not talk much outside the home.



Mary came to us about the time Alex and Anber were getting adopted. This was hard on her because she really, really wanted to be adopted, but we didn't know yet at the time how her case would turn out. She was picked up by the Department of Human Services (DHS) when her mom was caught stealing and hiding items on her daughter, and they also discovered Mary was deaf. She was 5 years old when we got her, and she had almost no language at all. No one had taught her sign language, and she couldn't speak very much. Her affect was very flat, and she had almost no expression. They said she was cognitively delayed, but it turned out that she just needed language. DHS got her hearing aids, and we later helped her get cochlear implants and taught her sign language. Her whole face changed, and now she has one of the brightest smiles I have ever seen. She is super intelligent and very advanced at school. We are really proud of her. Mary has worked so hard to catch up on many things she missed out on very early.

Kirk and Barrett came next, and they were the only two we adopted without fostering first. Our adoption worker told us about them when she came out for us to sign papers to move Alex and Anber into adoptive placement. Kirk has cerebral palsy and a shunt in his head for hydrocephalus. Barrett has fetal alcohol syndrome. They were already legally free when we met them, but they had lots of placements so we did a very slow transition to be sure we were all a good fit. They are half-brothers with the same mother, and she turned out to be a very young woman who is a good friend to the boys even if she wasn't able to parent. We invited her to the adoption, and she came. I can't imagine how hard that was for her. It was really special for the boys, though.

Kyrie was our surprise. She is Anber's half-sister, and we found out she was on the way right as Anber's case was going to trial. Her mother did so many different drugs for so much of the pregnancy that they told us there was no way the baby would be born alive. When she was born, there were so many complications that they told us she wouldn't live a day, then 30 days, then 30 months. She is on palliative care now, but she has lived to be 20 months and has been in the hospital for more than three-quarters of her life. We don't take a single day for granted anymore, not since Kyrie was born.

That's how we got six kids. We never planned on that. It just happened.

We never got into fostering for adoption, but adoption happened anyway. When a child has lived with you for 2 or 3 years, how can you not love them? Our house filled up in only 4 years, but which one should we send away? No, there was no question about it. Of course they could stay.

Yes, we did a lot. Sometimes too much. The most we ever had at once was nine. But as much as we did, it didn't even put a dent in the number of children who need good homes and safe families. The shortest time a child ever stayed with us was 3 hours. Not counting adoption, the longest a child ever stayed with us was 3 years.

We wrote our book *Keeping Kyrie* because we endured so much as we gathered our family, and writing was a coping skill, I think. Nathan and I were both already writers, but our story was aching to be told. We wanted to share a real story about what fostering is like, with all the good and the bad and the ugly of everyday life. We wanted to encourage those parents in the trenches, whether it be fostering or having medically fragile children or just regular parenting, which is hard enough as it is. We wanted to give some hope, maybe, by promising that families are worth it, even when life is really hard.

The children helped choose which of their own stories to share in the book, and we respected the limits they set. They have listened to the audiobook, and it's been really therapeutic for them. There are some parts we continue processing, hard parts and funny parts that still make them roar with laughter when they hear it.

We have sold the book to help pay for services for our six special needs children. Because they were adopted from foster care, we do have Medicaid, but there is a lot not covered that you don't think about until it's your child that needs it to function. Because of this experience, we also founded a nonprofit that raises money for

families of medically fragile children to help buy equipment and supplies not covered by insurance. We also are opening group homes to help other children in foster care, including one for medically fragile children.

We also realized that there were other children who have special needs, but the literature to prepare them for these experiences or find others like them was so limited. So we started writing children's books about medically fragile children, cerebral palsy, being deaf with cochlear implants, and being a sibling of kids with special needs.



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