

## *Foster Care as a Support to Families, Not a Substitute for Parents*

### THE PULL OF FOSTERING

The possibility of being a foster parent started off as just an idea that tugged a little on my heart. The first nudge came while I was finishing my bachelor's degree. At the time I was a single woman, focused on school and my job as a nanny. Then, one day I heard about foster care. I started doing some research and reading articles about what it means to be a foster parent. The more I searched, the more I felt that pull on my heart to do something. I knew foster care was something I couldn't take on right away as I needed to finish school and become a bit more financially stable. I promised myself after I graduated that I would pursue it if I still had that tug.

I graduated, got engaged, and attended a foster care orientation. I put in my foster care application and attended my training. A couple months later, I got a text from my licensing worker that I was officially a licensed foster parent. About 2 weeks later, I received my first placement, a 6-month-old boy, C, who was being moved from another foster home. I said yes and had no idea what I just committed to. Along with that tug to pursue foster care, I also had a vision to do it differently by also partnering with and supporting the biological parents.

From the day C entered my home, I was given signs he was going to be a part of something much bigger. It was C who taught me that loving a child doesn't have to come from a place of carrying them for 9 months and then giving birth. In fact, DNA has absolutely nothing to do with parenting. It's the caring and nurturing of a child that develops the bond.

After a couple months I started transporting C to and from visits with his mom. Between pickups and drop offs, his mom disclosed parts of her life: the struggles she faced, the obstacles she overcame, and her strength to keep fighting. Through her story, she revealed a truth. Parents whose children enter the system are not bad people. They are people just like you and I, but they often lack a network of support and resources.

I tried to encourage and support C's mom in any way I could. Sometimes it meant picking her up on the opposite side of town to go to a doctor's appointment for C because I knew she should be there but had no ride. It meant making sure she had a safe place for her son to sleep when he began overnight visits at her home. It meant telling her how proud I was of her, that she is an amazing mother, and to keep fighting for her son.



What a battle she fought.

At 18-months-old, C returned home to his mother permanently. I will never forget that day, as it was filled with a great deal of happiness for C and his mother but also a bit of grief. As foster parents, I think reunification is something we are asked to face time and time again. While not nearly as painful, it's a small piece of what parents feel when their child is removed and placed in the system.

C just celebrated his third birthday with me, his mother, and other family members by his side. I have continued to play an active role in the lives of C and his mother. I know many people want to hear that C's mother's life is perfect now, but that's just not real. There have been some struggles, but that's fine because life is messy and it's all a part of the journey.

Along with being a licensed foster parent, I am also a foster care navigator with the Family Enrichment Center. I have the pleasure of guiding people through the foster care licensing process by sharing my own stories and experiences, acting as a mentor, connecting them to resources, and helping them navigate the system. Through my work I try to help potential foster parents see the importance of working with biological parents and acting like an extended family of supports for them, instead of a replacement. I truly believe this is what foster care should be.

To learn more about the Family Enrichment Center, visit <https://www.fecfamily.com/>.

To learn more about foster care navigators, visit <http://fcnp.org/>.



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