

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

Supporting our Children after a New Placement





Friends,

If you're reading this resource, you might be looking for ways to prepare your children to become a foster family. Or you might have already said YES and a new child's entrance into your family may have shaken the foundation a bit.

Each member of your family might be experiencing a range of emotions from excitement to nerves to grief to anger. Welcoming a child into your home through foster care is a transition for everyone. Your new child may be grieving the loss of familiar things. He may feel uncomfortable in your home. He might be angry, struggling to give words to what he has experienced, unable to fully trust you yet. His history of neglect and abuse might leave him with needs you don't feel prepared for, a history of survival strategies that while no longer needed in your home, kept him alive before he came to you.

But it's not just your new child who might be struggling. Your forever children might wonder where they fit into this new family dynamic or be struggling in their relationship with this new sibling. They may be doubting your decision to foster and wonder if you've just made a terrible mistake.

These different feelings—they all make sense to me and it's going to take time for everyone to adjust to one another. You are a new family. And with this new family is going to come a lot of growing pains.

There are certain things we can do to prepare our children for becoming a foster family. And there is a way we can show up with them when the realities of foster care don't meet their expectations of foster care. This resource can help guide you as you consider what your children need, but your County Director would be happy to continue the conversation with you at any time. Your whole family is important to us!

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Before Fostering

It's important to have conversations before we begin fostering, as well as between placements, to try to help prepare our children for the realities of being a foster family. At the Restore Network we see foster care as family ministry, so we need to consider whether we are all on board with becoming a foster family. If someone in the family isn't, you need to set aside time to consider why that is and how that is going to impact your family and the new child you invite into your home. Ask them questions and see what their concerns are—they may be valid ones your family needs to consider before opening your home!

Questions to ask:

- What do we think might change for our family?
- What might stay the same?
- What might be good?
- What might be hard?

Set realistic expectations for yourself and your children. Explain challenges that might arise and how your family plans to navigate those challenges. Sometimes it's hard to know what you don't know. This is where it might be important to talk with another foster family or your County Director about their family's own experience.

What will we do if it gets hard?

Make a Plan.



Discuss some ideas for ways that your family can remain connected throughout the hard. Maybe you commit to continuing special family rituals, activities, traditions, etc. Maybe you'll set aside time to talk and remind each other of the reasons you opened your home in the first place. Maybe you commit to setting up regular respite so you can pull your family in close for times of reconnection. Talk to your family and friends now and see if someone can step in to provide this respite for you.

Teach towards Empathy.



Teach your children about the foster care system using books or real life stories you know to help them begin to grow empathy. Empathy is really important for the success of everyone in your home but it isn't just caught passively, it's taught intentionally. You can teach empathy by pointing things out and asking your children how they would feel, how they think the other person feels, what they would do, etc. If you have a young child read them books like [Maybe Days](#) and [Riley the Brave](#) so they can learn about their new siblings or the foster care system in language they'll understand. Older youth might consider reading a story from the perspective of a foster youth such as [More to Me](#).



Build Empathy for New Child.

After placement, share info about the new child without sharing the child's story. This may increase empathy and understanding for why it might feel hard right now or why the new child might be struggling. But be protective of the new child and don't share too much personal information without their consent.



Remember the Why.

Talking about why you are fostering gives your family a "reason" to stay the course when it gets hard. It reminds your family of the bigger picture and unites you together. Talking with your children about what might be hard normalizes the hard when it occurs and also sets up the model that they can come talk to you.



We're Still Struggling!

What if you've done all this, and your child still struggles with the reality of your family's decision to foster?

Our children can feel a variety of emotions after we welcome a child:

- **Happiness.**

I enjoy having another sister. This is fun!

- **Anger.**

This isn't how it was supposed to be, this is too hard.

- **Grief & regret.**

I miss my old life. We never should have done this. I miss how things were.

- **Jealousy.**

The new child is getting more attention than me. My parents love her more.

- **Fear.**

I don't feel safe anymore. I don't like the way I am being treated. She's mean.

In rare occasions, our children can even experience secondary trauma symptoms after being exposed to the pain of their siblings' stories and confusion from their challenging behaviors.

All of these feelings are normal for a child to go through at some point. They're normal for you to go through too! Your lives have been turned upside down and all of you may question whether you should have signed up to do this!

If these feelings have been your experience or the experience of your children, it's not an automatic sign that you have done something wrong with your family, that you need to disrupt the placement, or that you need to quit fostering. It just means you need to pay attention.

Hard Doesn't Mean Wrong

by Katie Myette, Restore Network Executive Director

I remember the early days of foster care. I remember when God called us to open our home to vulnerable children. I remember going through the training classes and trying to figure out the foster care system which seemed foreign and confusing (still does sometimes!). I remember when we got our official license, and I remember when Mary from DCFS called us about a 5 month old little boy who needed a place to go the next day.

In those early days, I was so sure of our calling. I knew this was the path God had called us to, and I couldn't wait to see how God would write our story.

I also remember when life suddenly became really, really difficult. I remember finding out I was pregnant 10 days after this sweet boy came to our home. I remember trying to muddle through our first experience with foster care while feeling exhausted, emotional, sleep-deprived, and overwhelmed. I remember two weeks into our first placement when my preschooler got the stomach flu and vomited off the top bunk in the middle of the night. I remember when DCFS called and told us to prepare for the baby to leave our home. I remember grieving and trying to understand what God was doing. Honestly, I remember wondering on multiple occasions if we'd made a huge mistake and ruined our lives.

And really, all this wondering started when life got hard.

It's a strange thing, but we have a tendency to evaluate whether we are genuinely following God based on whether the journey is easy or hard. When life gets hard, we wonder if "God is closing the door" or if we misunderstood the call from the beginning.

This is strange because God never promised life would be easy if we follow Him. The truth is that He promised it would be hard.

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. -John 16:33

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. -Luke 9:23

You see, I'm okay with the idea of life being hard when I follow God, but I struggle with the reality.

I'm okay with the movie-type version of struggle: dramatic music playing in the background, lasts approximately 2 hours, and a solid redemption scene at the end. But that's not how it feels when life really gets hard.

It feels like you're drowning. It feels like you've wrecked your life. It feels like life might never be okay again. The hard stuff really is hard. There is no magic pill to make it feel easy. It's just hard.

Over time, God taught me to look at the cross. I began to recognize that when Jesus followed God's path for Him, it led Him to the cross. I began to realize that just because something is hard doesn't mean you're not doing the right thing. In fact, it may mean that you're exactly where God wants you to be.



Safe, Seen & Soothed

In their book, [The Power of Showing Up](#), Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson discuss the importance of providing children with the gift of security. To do so, they state children need to be safe, seen, and soothed.

We talk a lot about this when we talk about the children we are parenting who came to us with trauma histories. But here in this resource, we want to talk about this concept in the context of our forever children—those we've birthed or those we've previously adopted—the children who were already in our home when we said yes to another child. We want to specifically look at how we can provide security in the days and months following the placement of a new child in our home.

Here's what providing security might look like for a struggling child in our family after we welcome a new child:



Safe.

This is emotional safety, not just physical safety. Our children are asking: Am I allowed to have my feelings?, Even the hard and messy ones?, Are they welcome? Will you listen? Or....Do I have to filter and hide how I really feel?



Seen.

Our children are asking: Do you see that I am struggling?, Do you notice my needs?, Am I on your radar as someone to be concerned about? Or....Is everyone else's needs taking a priority right now?



Soothed.

Our children are asking: Can you sit in this with me?, Do you know what to do?, Do I feel better after I am with you? Or...Do I need to grab my own coping mechanism by myself to deal with how I feel? Am I alone in this?



Digging in: Safe

Am I allowed to have my feelings?

Even the hard and messy ones?

Are they welcome?

Will you listen?

To be safe for our children, we need to create an atmosphere of communication, where we ask questions and build space for them to come tell us when they're struggling. Safety means we accept all their feelings without dismissing them or telling them they shouldn't feel that way. As foster parents, we must be careful to not immediately point out the new child and how much she needs our help and make that an excuse for why our child must "do her part to help." We can encourage empathy and being a helper while also acknowledging how hard that might be for our child and giving her space to feel how she feels.

To encourage feelings of being safe:

1. Play high/low every day—sharing one positive thing and one negative thing about the day. Share yours and ask the child to share theirs. This models that good and hard feelings can exist at the same time.
2. Tell her about the hard things you're struggling with too. You don't have to give all the details and certainly you can go too far with this but admitting that there are certain things that are hard for you too can really help your child. It shows her that you understand and that you are willing to hear how she is really feeling because you are leading with vulnerability and honesty.
3. Do a daily check in with the struggling child. Celebrate the wins with her and acknowledge the continued struggles. Don't feel like you have to fix it right away—just show her that you are there to listen.



Here's what you might say to a child who gives you words about how hard it is:

- I am so glad you came and told me how you feel.
- That makes sense.
- Tell me more.
- Sometimes I feel that way too.
- Is there anything I can do to help?



Digging in: Seen

*Do you see that I am struggling?
Do you notice my needs?
Am I on your radar as
someone to be concerned about?*

To see our forever child in the middle of her struggles is to pay attention, to support her without her having to ask, to intentionally engage her with our words and presence, and to see her unique experience. To remind her that she is your child, that she is special to you, and you love her even if it doesn't seem like you have as much time and energy to give to her like you used to.

To encourage feelings of being seen:

- Ask: How are you doing today? Is there anything you need today?
- Say: I'm glad you're my kiddo. I enjoy spending time with you. I love you.
- Take notice: I noticed you seemed frustrated today so I _____.
- Make a plan: I felt like we hadn't spent a lot of time together, so I planned _____.
- Point out moments where you see them struggling and give them words to name how they feel. "I noticed you seemed sad when your friend was playing with your brother and not you." "I noticed you seemed angry tonight after I helped your brother with his chores and not you." This gives you an opportunity to hear them out but also an opportunity to brainstorm a solution with them or to remind them about why you are parenting this new child the way you are.



Digging in: Soothed

*Can you sit in this with me?
Do you know what to do?
Do I feel better after I am with you?*

It's often enough to just listen and provide emotional safety and comfort for a child that is struggling. Sometimes just being heard and knowing you are loved is enough to get you through that tough moment. But sometimes, we need to go a step further and make an action plan for our struggling child.

To encourage feelings of being soothed:

- She might need some quality time with her parents, and you may need to set up some consistent opportunities to spend alone time with her.
- She may need some alone time or respite throughout the course of the day and so maybe you set up a special time for her or respite with a neighbor or a grandparent.
- Maybe you set up respite for the new child and you pull your forever children in close and use those moments to reconnect.
- If you're a two-parent family, maybe you divide and conquer and have a parent spend some more one on one time with the child who is struggling.
- Maybe you just set aside time in the evenings, at bedtime perhaps, to just give her space to talk. Play high low and be okay if she says hard things about her new siblings. "That makes sense. Sometimes I feel that way too."
- She may need you to simply hold her and provide her with physical touch and comfort.
- She may need verbal reassurance that you care. "I love you. You matter to me. I am glad you're my kid."
- Consider making a code word she can say when she needs you, just a quick sign that lets you know she's struggling and needs some reassurance.
- Maybe she needs your help to problem solve to meet her needs or improve challenges that she is experiencing.
- Maybe you enter into the relationship she has with her new sibling and provide some mentoring for them to make improvements in their relationship: doing shared activities that build bonds and attachment, family rituals, nurture group, etc. You can't expect two struggling children to be able to find a solution or solve what's disconnecting them on their own, but your presence can help both children grow in their relationship with each other.



Listening to Adult Adoptive Siblings

Listening to the voices of adult siblings in adoptive and foster families can help us see and meet the needs of our children in deeper and more meaningful ways. Check out the personal story and trauma-informed resources from one such person, Dr. Jana Hunsley:

"I could not understand why no one asked me how I was doing, recognizing that the little boys running around were my brothers, that the overwhelmed parents were my parents, that this was my permanent and forever family, and that we all lived in one home together. I wanted to scream from the rooftop that all of this change, all of this transition was happening to me too...I was struggling to make sense of all the new and all the change that seemed to seep into every tiny part of my life, and yet no one seemed to recognize that I had experienced any change at all."

Read more here: <http://www.project1025.org/>.



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