

focus
BY JAYNE SCHOOLER

Why are Foster



Parents Leaving?

What Foster Parents Want Their Agencies to Know

“A startling statistic: Almost half of foster parents quit within a year of their first placement. Twenty to 25 percent of foster parents quit each year and another quarter express uncertainty about continuing.” — Casey Foster Family Assessment Training Workbook

The Gibsons, attracted by a recruitment ad for foster parents, excitedly made the decision to pursue the possibility. After contacting their local children services department, they signed up for orientation. Following orientation and many hours of pre-service training, and a homestudy, they received the word — they were now licensed foster parents.

Just four weeks after getting their license, their worker called to ask them to consider fostering three children. “These are beautiful children, ages 6-10. They have been in three other foster homes over the last year and a half, and I know you will be a great fit for them. Why don’t you let me bring them over and let you decide.”

A few hours later, the Gibsons met the children and indeed, they were beautiful. They readily agreed to begin their fostering journey. As their workers closed the front door, David and Rebecca turned and looked at each other and then the children. “Now what?” they thought.

During the next few weeks, the Gibsons soon moved through the honeymoon stage of the placement into reality. Although they had been told at training what to expect, they believed it wouldn’t happen to them. What they expected and what they experienced were vastly different. After months of trying

to make it work, with little validation from their agency, the Gibsons made a critical decision — fostering wasn’t for them. They called their worker and asked that the children be moved. They also asked that their license be canceled.

Could this fostering disruption have been

What can agencies do to prepare for those shattered assumptions?

Strategy: Recognize a few common expectations that are typical of new foster parents, talk about them with parents in the assessment stage and create an on-going conversation around them.

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prevented? Possibly. By recognizing the reality of the following statements, agencies can be in a better position to assess, prepare and support foster families.

1. MY AGENCY NEEDS TO KNOW THAT AS A NEW FOSTER PARENT, I MAY HAVE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS. I MAY BE BROADSIDED BY SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS.

The question is not “If parents experience shattered assumptions, what will they do?” but rather “When parents experience shattered assumptions, what will they do?” Of course, the experience of unmet expectations will fall on a continuum from mild disappointments to severely shattered dreams.

COMMON EXPECTATIONS

1. Our love will be enough.
2. We will feel love for and connection with this child quickly.
3. This child will step into our family system and easily learn how to function within our rules, goals and ambitions.
4. Our biological children will embrace this new child as a sibling.
5. Our child will fit well into our extended family and be welcomed by them.
6. Our friends and acquaintances will validate our role as parents and support us through this fostering process.
7. We will never feel regrets or ambivalence in adopting this child with a traumatic past.

2. MY AGENCY NEEDS TO KNOW THAT ALTHOUGH I HAVE HAD THE TRAINING, I DO NOT HAVE LIFE EXPERIENCE IN LIVING WITH TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN. I WILL HAVE EMOTIONS AND THOUGHTS THAT CATCH ME UNAWARE.

A tremendous challenge stands before foster and adoptive parents while caring for a traumatized child. There are three main

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elements in parents’ responses to their child’s trauma and behavior, according to the article “Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents,” in the May 2005 issue of “Psychiatric Annals:”

1. Believing and validating their child’s experiences.
2. Tolerating their child’s affect (emotions).
3. Managing their own emotional responses.

Believing and Validating Their Child’s Experiences

“Dillon’s caseworker told us about the extreme sexual abuse he experienced as a toddler. I knew it was truth, but believing such horror could be done to a child is another thing. Can you know something is true but still not believe it? I know that doesn’t make sense. I know it is true. I just have to believe it.” — Christa, foster mom of 4-year-old Dillon

Tolerating Their Child’s Affect (Emotions)

“If you had told me a year ago that I would be tolerating certain behaviors in my home,

I would have said, ‘You are crazy!’ But now, here we are, navigating through these behavioral challenges that were so unexpected.”

— Carolyn and Rick, parents of 9-year-old Jacob

Managing Their Own Emotional Responses

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able to manage my own emotions, but this 7-year-old triggers such frustration and anger in me, I feel out of control.” — David, adoptive dad of 7-year-old Bekah

Hundreds of foster and adoptive parents were surveyed in workshops across the country. They were asked, “Of the three elements above, which is most difficult for you?” they responded overwhelmingly: “managing our own emotional responses.” Why would this be true for so many?

Many foster and adoptive parents find themselves in an unfamiliar place. They perhaps have had parenting experience, but only parenting nontraumatized children. They have not cared for children who lack extreme impulse control and who have problems with boundaries, oppositional behavior, difficulty expressing emotions, and so on. They are at a time and place in their lives they have never been. It has stopped feeling good, and they do not like what they are becoming.

3. AGENCY NEEDS TO KNOW THAT MY FAMILY WILL GO THROUGH A

TRANSFORMATION, THAT FOSTERING ISN’T A JOB, BUT A LIFESTYLE CHANGE FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY. OUR FAMILY MAY BE CHANGING AND NO ONE SUPPORTS US AND GUIDES US THROUGH THOSE CHANGES — ONES WE MAY NOT LIKE.

The story of the frog and the kettle, probably more a fable than truth, may provide a wake-up call for new foster parents caring for traumatized, abused and neglected children:

It has been said that if you put a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will leap out right away to escape the danger. But, if you put a frog in a kettle filled with cool, pleasant water and gradually heat the kettle until it starts boiling, the frog will not become aware of the threat until it is too late. The frog’s survival instincts are geared toward detecting sudden changes.

This story is often used to illustrate how humans have to be careful to watch slowly changing trends in the environment, not just the sudden changes. It’s a warning to keep us paying attention not just to obvious threats, but to more slowly developing ones.

What does this story have to do with adoptive or foster parents and traumatized children?

Here’s the recipe:

1. One loving, excited, potentially unprepared adoptive family.
2. One new child, who has had significant trauma and has developed strategies of survival.
3. One “cool and pleasant” home.
4. An emotional thermostat to which no one is paying attention.

As parents and child experience ricocheting emotions, the emotional thermostat, just like the boiling pot for the frog, begins to rise. Everyone knows things are not working well, but everyone steps into denial about what is happening. No one is watching the emotional thermostat. Before long, the entire family is sucked into a negative cycle of relating to

one another, and the thermostat begins to overheat.

What Can Agencies Do to Manage These Realities?

One of the most important strategies is this: Create better relationships between foster parents and their agency by planning more effective, supportive home visits that ask the right questions and listen for the answers. It sounds like a simple answer, but most foster families state they simply need a listening ear.

The following list of questions will open the door to the issues discussed above and validate the journey for so many foster parents — especially those who are considering leaving our programs.

Since becoming the foster or adoptive parent of a traumatized child, what changes have you noticed? We are going to talk about some important areas.

1. How do you see yourself? How has that changed since your child entered the family?

2. What does your support system look like? How have your social activities changed? How do you feel about those changes?
3. How have you been impacted by the responses from family and community regarding the issues you face with your child? How have those responses made you feel?
4. How are you managing strong feelings? How do you see your spouse managing strong feelings? Has that changed since your child has entered your family?
5. Do you feel competent as a parent? If not, when did that change for you?
6. If you have other permanent children in the household, how would you describe changes you've seen in them? Positive? Neutral? Negative?
7. Do you feel safe? Do your children feel safe?
8. Do you react to triggers connected to your child's trauma experiences?
9. Do you feel you have control over your life?
10. Do you believe you can influence the behavior of your traumatized child?
11. Have you noticed any changes within

yourself as a result of the stress under which you live? (numbing, hypersensitivity, or increased sleeplessness)

12. Do you use outside resources to help in decision-making (self-protection and setting boundaries)? ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jayne Schooler, an enthusiastic supporter of families formed by adoption or foster care for more than 30 years, currently serves as a trainer, consultant and curriculum writer with the Institute for Human Services in Columbus, Ohio. She has trained both nationally and internationally and her most recent work has been done in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. She is the author of seven books in the field of foster care and adoption. This article was adapted from Jayne Schooler's new book, "Wounded Children, Healing Homes: How Traumatized Children Impact Adoptive and Foster Families" released in August as a downloadable book exclusively on www.navpress.com. Co-authors include Betsy Keefer Smalley and Dr. Timothy Callahan.

(kids in waiting)



Sean, 15, is fun to talk to and has a great personality. This young man is a joy to be around. A homebody? No way! Sean loves to be out and about. Being able to get out of the house and just be outside is enjoyable for this kid. When outdoors, Sean prefers to play either basketball or practice his skateboarding skills. When getting out of the house isn't an option, Sean likes to spend his downtime playing a good video game or listening to his MP3 player. He has good relationships with his peers and the adults in his life.

Sean does well in school. He is attending the ninth grade. He participates in class and his teachers all have great things to say about him. He is benefiting from counseling, which will need to continue after placement.

A fun teen, Sean is looking for a loving and supportive home. If your family could provide these things for Sean, we urge you to inquire. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related costs. For Utah children, only homestudied families from all states are encouraged to inquire. For more information, contact The Adoption Exchange at (800) 451-5246. Child ID 8304