

Six Misconceptions about Foster Parenting

by Sheryl Grey



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There are a variety of reasons why people choose to become foster parents. For many people, fostering can be one of life's most rewarding experiences. For some, it can be the pathway to adoption. And at times, being a foster parent may bring some of the most difficult challenges you will ever face. That's why it's so important to do your research before making the decision to become a foster parent.

Being a foster parent opened my eyes to a side of society to which I had never been exposed. For the first time in my life, I found myself interacting with parents whose children were taken away because the parents were either addicted to drugs or alcohol, mentally ill, unstable, abusive, or simply unable to care for their children. I had never met a prostitute or a crack addict, and I had never taken care of a child who had been severely traumatized until I became a foster parent. And then, all bets were off.

Suddenly I was caring for children who had been neglected, abused, and traumatized in inhumane and horrific ways. My vocabulary enlarged to include such terminology as post-traumatic stress disorder, attachment disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder. For my husband and me, life as we knew it was over, and a new, much more challenging life had begun. We fostered until we adopted four children, and then we decided that our family was large enough.

As foster parents, we frequently encountered curious people. Some might have just been a little nosy, but others were genuine in their curiosity, sometimes because they were considering fostering as well. In interacting with people, I realized that many had misconceptions about being a foster parent, so I wanted to address some of these misconceptions here.

Before I go any further, I want to mention that it's important to know that requirements regarding foster care vary by state, so if you are contemplating becoming a foster parent, it's wise to learn what your state's requirements are. For an interactive map with information on each state's requirements, please see [Adopt US Kids](#).

Misconception #1 – You must have a two-parent home.

While raising children is probably easier with two parents at home, in most cases you are not required to have a two-parent home to become a foster parent. Over the years, I have met several foster parents who were single parents, and they managed to make it work. Of course, they generally had a good support system in place through the help of friends and family who could step in and help out if necessary. With that said, if you are a single parent, you may want to foster older children rather than very young ones, such as newborns, who tend to have a funny way of stealing your sleep away from you and making you exhausted.

Misconception #2 – You must have a stay-at-home parent in the home.

If you are married, and you and your spouse both work outside the home, you can still be foster parents. However, if you choose to go through an independent agency rather than your county's Department of Children and Family Services, you may face some obstacles. Individual agencies may have their own rules that pertain to the living arrangements and lifestyles of their potential foster parents. One other issue to consider is that if you decide to take in young children, you might incur additional childcare costs unless you are able to make arrangements through a community program that provides free or discounted childcare for foster children. Any additional childcare costs are generally not covered and will come out of your own pocket.

Misconception #3 – The kids will be happy to be with you instead of in their homes where they were abused or neglected.

While we would all like to believe that our foster children are so glad to be with us and away from the abuse or neglect they suffered before their arrival, that is generally not the case. While you may feel like you are saving these children, they may not see it that way. Remember that they have been removed from their parents and placed with strangers. Even children of abusive parents still love their parents and have a bond with them. You may be the nicest person in the world, and you may have a beautiful home, but these children don't know you, it's not their home, everything is unfamiliar to them, and they are no longer in possession of most if not all of their personal belongings. This change of environment is sudden, usually without warning, and is a scary situation for any child. They may warm up to you in time, but they will still often miss what they left, even though it was a bad situation.

Misconception #4 – Your personal information will be private.

When you go through foster parent training, they will tell you that your personal information will be kept personal, and from my experience, the caseworkers do try their best to maintain this privacy; however, your name will show up on court documents and in other paperwork. And we all know that with the availability of the Internet, all you need is a name to find out a great deal of information about someone. So, while caseworkers will attempt to black out things like addresses and phone numbers, it's simply not enough to keep your information private. Try searching for yourself online with just your name and city, and see what you can find. If you own a home, your property tax record is public information, and armed with just a name and city, anyone can find information about you, such as your address, the square footage of your home, and even how much your house is worth. Two of our foster children's parents actually told us that they had driven by our house to see where their children were living. After that, we got an alarm system.

Misconception #5 – You will make a large amount of money.

The monthly per diem or reimbursement amount for foster children varies greatly by state, and independent agencies' rates can be different from the states' reimbursement rates. In addition, the amount can also vary according to the age of the child, as well as the presence of disabilities or illnesses that may classify the child as "medically fragile." Because these amounts vary so much, it is difficult to identify a specific rate. According to a [2012 study from Child Trends](#), state per diem rates per child range from under \$10 per day up to the high twenties per day on average for basic care. The rates for medically fragile children can be quite a bit more in some states; however, these children need a great deal more care and may need to be transported to more medical appointments, physical therapy, and other services. Some states also provide a

small additional allowance for clothing on a one-time or quarterly basis. Keep in mind that any expenses for foster children must come out of this per diem amount, including clothing, food, daycare or babysitting fees, athletic and extra-curricular activities, gifts, vacations, and any other expenses the children may have. As you can see, you will not get rich from being a foster parent. If anything, you may need to find ways to stretch your resources to continue to live comfortably.

Misconception #6 – Adoption through the foster care system is quicker than through private agencies.

When a child is taken into the foster care system, the initial plan for that child is almost always reunification. Of course, this sometimes changes as time goes on, but you really don't know when children are placed with you whether or not they will be reunited with their families or available for adoption at some point. It is heartbreaking to get attached to children who are then returned to their parents, but it's important to remember that as a foster parent, your role is intended to be a temporary one, and in many cases, it will be. You could potentially have multiple placements that result in reunification, so it might take a long time before you are finally fostering a child who quickly becomes available for adoption. If you are willing to adopt an older child, the wait may be a lot shorter, because there are many older children whose parents' rights have already been terminated. These children are waiting to be adopted.

As you can see, there are definitely misconceptions about being a foster parent. These are just a few of the more common misconceptions that I have encountered personally. If you are thinking of becoming a foster parent, I urge you to find out about the requirements in your state and do your research before making a decision about whether to get licensed through a private agency or through your local Department of Children and Family Services. What may be a good fit for one family may not work as well for another. Ask a lot of questions, and if you do choose to become a foster parent, you will be making an informed decision.