

# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

Chuck Johnson, *editor*  
Ryan Hanlon, *editor*  
Christie Renick, *editor*

May 2018

NO.  
119

## The Fight of a Foster Parent

BY CARRIE DAHLIN

**F**oster parents are fighters, advocates, and defenders, yet they live in simple families and consist of everyday people. They are simply people who decide to actively help children who are living in the uncertainty of foster care. Foster parents not only battle through the red tape of the system, but they strive to break down barriers caused by abuse and neglect of the children in their care. Their intention is to be a safe place for vulnerable children until they can return to their families of origin or be adopted by a loving family—and they see a future in which these children can thrive.

Of course, the precious children in foster care are the most affected and most wounded, from infants to teenagers, because they live with little to no control about their own future. We, as foster parents, fight the best way we can to help them flourish in the space they are given and the time they are under our care.

### Choosing to Fight as a Foster Parent

For most of us, when we first feel the tug on our heart, leading us toward foster parenting, we are somewhat naïve about what is ahead. I tend to see this as a common part of the journey after spending the last eight years being a foster parent myself and hearing from other foster parents. Often, there is an eager desire to help children and their birth families during a difficult season of life. However, like most aspects of life, (careers,



National Council  
For Adoption

225 N. Washington Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 299-6633  
[www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)

marriage, parenting, etc.) we don't really know what it is like until we jump into it with both feet and experience it for ourselves.

When a child first enters our care, we instantly become their advocate. This is a great privilege and comes with a deep responsibility. As foster parents, we often have to make the decision to parent a child or sibling group with little notice, and usually with even less information on the situation at hand. Yet, foster parents willingly open their doors at all hours of the day or night, along with their hearts, to traumatized children of all ages, races, and cultures.

Parenting kids who come from a place of trauma is a delicate task and a hard journey to navigate. We find ourselves fighting in a battle of sorts, many battles actually, on their behalf. This consumes many aspects of our life, but more importantly, it will impact every aspect of *their* lives as well.

## Fighting for Attachment

One of our biggest responsibilities as foster parents is to show unconditional love to the children in our care and help them heal from the trauma they have been through. We fight to tear down defensive walls by choosing to continue to show love and grace to children who have been through too much in their short lives. We fight a gentle fight, one with hugs, patience, late-night conversations, and silly game nights while—at the very same time—providing for their physical and emotional needs. We do this even when children do not understand why they have to live with us and continually push us away out of fear of being hurt and rejected once again. Working through these barriers is so important for the child's development, but one of the hardest aspects to navigate because every child is different and unique as is their personal situation.

I recall one situation over many days sitting next to a 4-year-old girl who raged and screamed and physically couldn't stop herself. She was afraid and mad all at the same time. In these moments, foster parents have to remember that it's not personal, that the flood of emotions that these kids experience is so overwhelming for their young minds. It was up to me to be a safe place for her, someone she could let the emotions out with, knowing that she would be okay and that I would still be there for her.

Years ago I found myself sobbing to a professional who came to my house, distraught because I had a two-year-old boy who would not let me show any affection toward him or comfort him when he was hurt. I spent almost a year trying to bond with this little guy and felt like he pushed me away every chance he got. After starting attachment counseling and implementing some therapy techniques, slowly I saw a

---

*When a child first enters our care, we instantly become their advocate. This is a great privilege and comes with a deep responsibility.*

---

child, who once sat two feet away from me during movie night, suddenly come lean against my leg on the couch. A while later he was sitting on my lap for just a few minutes before asking to get down. I found myself in tears when, instead of kicking me away, he finally rested his head on my shoulder and let me hold him when he scraped his knee. For foster parents, it is a sweet-tempered fight, one that takes time and patience. These sweet connections may not happen on our schedule, but we will wait for when the child is ready to make this connection. If I had not slowly persisted, we both would have missed out: him on learning to trust a mother's love and I on witnessing the sweet-natured child who I see today.

## Fighting Alongside Other Professionals

Part of foster parenting is teaming up with medical specialists, therapists, and many others in the helping profession to get the children in care the help they need. In addition to being at the mercy of the numerous appointments and meetings we are required to attend with the children in our care, we also know that a predictable, safe routine is in our kids' best interests. We make daily schedules to give them consistency. We fill our living room with toys that will help their development. We spend our days searching for items to improve their motor skills and communication needs. We search online for the best weighted blanket for their sensory needs or bottle types to help ensure their nutrition. We fill our weeks with home visits from physical therapists and occupational therapists so our kids can catch up developmentally. All of this comes with hours spent researching online, and connecting with others in similar situations, so we can provide what is best for our kids.

We work with caseworkers who are in charge of visitation schedules, appointments, and mandated programs for the children in our care. We prepare the kids to go on visits with their family, as they are a huge part of fostering. We pack a bag for them, knowing that when they return home, our afternoons will most likely be filled comforting anxious kids because going back and forth between two families is incredibly difficult for them to understand. Sometimes this means watching them meltdown over the smallest issue and giving them grace because we know inside there is a much bigger issue: a hurting heart, a confused brain, a kid who longs for a stable environment. Other times we sit on the floor next to them as they disclose their hurt and abuse and other past experiences, and while our heart hurts, we keep a calm face knowing they may have more they need to share.

*Part of foster parenting is teaming up with medical specialists, therapists, and many others in the helping profession to get the children in care the help they need.*

## Food Fights

Meal times are often another battle for many foster families. Often, we may be working closely with doctors for special diets or plans of action because of the many food-related issues we see in foster kids. If a child has been deprived of food, they may obsessively overeat or hide food as a survival instinct. Others may have anxiety around food or around eating with other people. And more often than not, when a child feels their life is out of their control, they will control what they can, and that can be what they put or refuse to put in their mouths.

We have welcomed kids who had anxiety with eating dinner together as a family because their previous routine was eating on the carpet by themselves while watching television. Sitting at a table, with a family of eight, was very daunting and often brought on meltdowns and a refusal to eat until everyone was finished. It is up to us to find creative ways to help them feel comfortable because when so much of their lives is in chaos it is easier for them to be defiant than vulnerable.

## School Fights

The fight of a foster parent often continues into the school setting as well. Advocating for the educational needs of any child can be intimidating, yet it is so important to be involved and part of the conversation. Attending meetings, documenting behaviors, and building relationships with the school staff and those involved are crucial when it comes to this specific type of battle.

I have seen behaviors at school that are manifestations from the anxiety of the changes in the child's life. I have had to work hard to be on the same page as the school staff in order to provide a unified front and care for a child. The consistency we can provide together is key in helping a child get settled. The effort may be taxing, but it is well worth the extra labor when we see a child thrive and the challenging behaviors dissipate.

## Experienced Fighters

One of the benefits of long-term foster parenting is that with every child, every scenario, and every case, foster parents build their knowledge on how to fight *better*. They are more prepared, have more tools, document more clearly, build more relationships, and parent through the impact of trauma with much more understanding.

*The consistency we can provide together is key in helping a child get settled. The effort may be taxing, but it is well worth the extra labor when we see a child thrive and the challenging behaviors dissipate.*

Because I cared for a child who struggled with the symptoms of food allergies for a long time, years later I was able to advocate for another child to get tested much sooner. This gave relief to her body after struggling with severe eczema. I have also cared for a child with hearing loss and because of this experience I was able to detect another child's symptoms at a much younger age and get them tested as well. So while we think we do not have the tools needed, often our experiences help pave the way to help future kids in our care.

Even when we are exhausted and ready for a break, we continue. We know the consequences for that child if we give up and transfer them to another home. We keep fighting for their best interests. One of the ways we are able to do this is largely in thanks to those around us who support us, lend a listening ear, babysit for us, bring us chocolate, text us encouraging words or scripture, and offer to help support our family with whatever tangible need we have.

We all feel hopeless at times: the case goes longer than expected, the child has behaviors that are hard to work with, we have professionals in our lives who we don't connect well with, etc. But sometimes, if we can get a break, take a breath and just catch up on sleep, we can look at the situation with a fresh pair of eyes and keep fighting the good fight, for the children in our home.

## Fighting for a Louder Voice

The one thing we lack, the one tool we desire the most, is a louder voice, one that will be heard by all parties involved. Foster parents are deep in the trenches, every day. And yet our voice is typically only heard at a whisper. Foster parents wish to become an equal part of the conversation about what is best for the children we are caring for day in and day out.

Sadly, I have lived this part of foster parenting as well, and yet I know the answer is not to walk away. If we all walk away, who will continue to be an advocate for the children in care? We need more voices, more foster parents, in order for all of us to have a louder voice. We need to fight for a system that has more accountability for its outcomes.

I have often somewhat joked and equally complained that it sometimes feels like foster parents are at the bottom of the food chain. I have lived in this season of life left to fend for myself because the system we work with is so broken. Yet, we hold onto a hope that maybe, just maybe, our hard work and the effort that goes into providing a typical home environment, safe surroundings, and willingness to walk knee-deep in trauma behaviors might have a positive impact on a child.

*The one thing we lack, the one tool we desire the most, is a louder voice, one that will be heard by all parties involved.*

## We Don't Always Fight to the End

We are fighters who do not always get to see the happy endings, and in many cases we do not get the privilege of knowing the future of a child after they leave our home. But in this, we can't regret the effort and time put in. We simply have to trust that the seeds we planted will produce positive and lasting results.

## Helping Others Learn to Fight

We also fight against the fear of others who do not think they have what it takes to become a foster parent. The most common phrase fellow foster parents hear from those around them is, "I could never be a foster parent." Many of us would beg to differ. It isn't the strength that you already think you have that gets you through the days to come, it is what you find that you have to do while you are in the middle of it. There are things you will learn about yourself and the children in your care that will impress upon you what you need in order to keep going. A stronger response to that often-heard question is, "if you won't, then who will?"

I have said, for many years now, until we have enough people step up to become foster parents, we will continue to have exhausted, over-full homes. All that was mentioned above might sound daunting. It should, because it is. However, please don't forget that these battles are fought on a daily basis by people just like you and me. Ordinary people who step into the uncomfortable, the painfully hard and messy situations, even if just for a season, means that a child can change course, stop the cycle of addiction, abuse, or neglect and thrive into adulthood. This is why we foster.

*Don't forget that these battles are fought on a daily basis by people just like you and me.*

## Ways You Can Join the Fight of a Foster Parent

**Lend a listening ear.** One of the biggest ways to help a foster parent is to listen to them and show them love. You will not understand all they are going through, but let them vent or digest the difficult situation, let them be vulnerable, and get their feelings out, and know that you don't have to fix it. Being a foster parent comes with a lot to digest emotionally, and we all handle it better some days and it will be harder on others.

**Donate.** Donations are always needed throughout the entire year: hygiene bags, homemade blankets for hospitals when a child joins a foster family, clothes and last minute supplies for welcoming a new child, books, games, etc. You can easily contact your local agency or local foster families and ask how you can help. The possibilities are endless when it comes to what

and how you can donate and it all helps meet the physical, emotional and social needs of foster children.

**Show your love.** Celebrate foster kids, talk to them, and more importantly, listen to them. Play that board game for the 10th time and do what they want to do. Be someone who shows them love and consistency and safety. It will go a long way. You may be the person that helps them take their mind off their pain, or the one who listens to them while they digest their struggles. Both are needed and much appreciated. Remember that foster kids have more going on in their lives than just being a kid and growing up. They have things handed to them that they did not ask for. It is hard for adults to handle most of what they go through, so show them love and treat them with respect, even when it seems that they do not want it.

**Respite care.** We all need to breathe and take a break when life gets hard, even the kids in our care sometimes need a new environment to let their guard down and have fun. Offering to provide respite care and watch foster children is a wonderful way to support a foster family. Volunteering for a Foster Parent Night Out is another great way to help your local foster families have an evening out while providing some organized fun for the kiddos. This puts you in direct contact with foster children and allows you to invest in their lives and provide some new experiences for them. It also allows the foster family some space to collect their thoughts, regroup, and have a time to rest—all of which will enable them to take better care of the children in their care and avoid burnout.

May is National Foster Care Month. Not only do I encourage you to support the foster families in your life, or get involved with your local programs that impact kids in foster care, but I strongly ask that you consider saying yes to opening your heart and home to a foster child. Let them help cook breakfast on the weekends, join your family for fun at the park, tuck them into bed each night, and let them know that they are safe and loved. By parenting foster children you can ease the pain of one of the most traumatic experiences of their lives and make the biggest difference in their future.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Dahlin has been a foster parent for over eight years. She writes for the *Fostering Families Today* magazine, in her column, Spilled Milk. She is the author of the foster parenting memoir, *What Led Me to You*, which is available on amazon.com. Carrie and her husband are currently raising five children, three of whom she has adopted from foster care. You can find more about Carrie at [www.CarrieDahlin.com](http://www.CarrieDahlin.com).



National Council  
For Adoption

SUPPORT NCFCA  
DONATE ONLINE ►►  
[www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)