



I'm Katie, mom to four amazing kids and three adorable dogs. While much of my work now focuses on preserving family connections and supporting relationships in children's lives, I didn't always think this way. In fact, I came to this work from a different perspective—I wanted to be a parent and believed adoption was the answer for me.

Our foster care journey began nearly 20 years ago. Hoping to adopt a child, my spouse and I enrolled in a required course on foster care. During our training, the emphasis was on the traditional foster care narrative—removing children from “bad” homes and placing them in “safe” homes. The narrative was “us vs. them,” with no mention of partnering with parents or our role in supporting reunification.

Our perspective changed when we met our oldest child's mother. For me personally, sitting in the hospital, I connected with a woman who had faced immense challenges in her life. I saw her grief over losing her older children to closed adoption and her fears about losing contact with her newborn. It was during that time that the reality of adoption hit me—my family's greatest joy was coming at the expense of another family's tragedy.

As our baby grew, we made sure they stayed in touch with their mother through phone calls and visits. Over time, our relationship with their mom evolved into one of friendship, and we began to rethink our approach to fostering. We decided to relicense as foster caregivers, but instead of focusing on adoption, we aimed to support families and act as a bridge to reunification.

Our first placement as foster caregivers was with a tiny baby. When 3 weeks passed without the baby seeing their mother, I knew my first task as a family supporter would be to advocate for visitation. As a mother, I couldn't imagine not seeing my infant for a few hours, much less 3 weeks! I contacted the caseworker who, completely swamped with her workload, did not have the time to arrange a visit. However, she did provide the phone number of the baby's uncle, who had been desperately trying to find the child following a traumatic removal.

We met the baby's mom and uncle at the local mall. As I loaded two babies into a grocery cart with two preschoolers hanging off the sides, I realized I was venturing into unknown territory. I had no training in partnering with families, nor did I know how to engage with parents who were struggling with the emotions that came with being separated from their child. But despite my fears, I moved forward. The first meeting was emotional, but it marked the beginning of a lasting relationship with the baby's family. Over time, our families came together, forming an extended family rooted in our shared love for this child.

Permanency for this baby wasn't reunification—it became coparenting. This child now has two moms—yes, they call us both "mom" and no, they don't get confused. We raise this child as a team, whether it's exploring family history with their mom or joking about their natural athleticism (which definitely didn't come from either of us!).

When you foster a child or youth, consider changing your perspective. Instead of just caring for the child, think about how you can support the child's parents, siblings, and extended family. These families, who are often struggling with poverty, addiction, and trauma, are experiencing some of the most difficult moments of their lives. Yet, they are still human beings, still parents, and still love their children. We're not here to "save" the children from their families; we're here to help a hurting family heal.

In my current role as a foster care and adoption consultant as well as a children's book author who writes for this audience, I offer the following advice:

1. **Start small.** From my story, you might think I'm advocating for extensive contact right away, but I don't recommend that. Like any new relationship, it should be built gradually. Take the time to get to know one another. It's also crucial to remember that the child's family is in crisis. Let go of your expectations for how they should respond to your outreach and offer them grace and space.
2. **Even if contact is not possible, there are still ways to help the child feel connected.** Let them know they don't have to choose between their biological and foster families. Find ways to include aspects of the child's family in your daily life. Whether it's a brief conversation at breakfast about a parent's favorite cereal, photos on the wall, or commenting on how the child has their mama's beautiful eyes, it's important to give children permission to love both families. This helps them develop a healthy identity.
3. **Seek advice from those who have been through this before, especially veteran parents with personal experience in foster care.** Every family is unique, and there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to building these relationships. Be curious and open to learning. Ask others what has worked for them and how they navigated challenges.

In conclusion, fostering a child is not just about caring for the child—it's about recognizing that the family is likely in crisis and it will take time and effort for stability to return. By shifting our perspective to prioritize connection, we can help children build a strong sense of identity and feel loved by all the important people in their lives. While the journey will be messy and challenging, fostering relationships with families brings invaluable rewards. By starting small, offering grace, and learning from those who have walked this path, we can make a lasting impact on children and families in need. After all, foster care should be about coming together to support families, not divide them.



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