

Foster Care Forum

Waukesha County
Health & Human Services
December 2008



Expect Weird Responses From Foster Kids Toward The Holidays By Jo Ann Wentzel

We expect holidays filled with joy and fun. Our wish is to share the holidays the way they should be with our foster kids. All we want is to feel good about being able to include kids who need the holiday spirit more than anyone. So, what is wrong? Why do these kids look like you've asked them to swallow poison rather than share the sumptuous feast? Why do they look at your gifts to them with disdain? Why do they pull away as you try to bring them closer into your family fold?

The reasons are simple. Number one is the guilt they feel. No doubt, your family celebrates the holidays in ways that are unfamiliar from the usually dysfunctional families most of our kids come from. If your foster kids find your ways of preparing for the holidays appealing, they will feel guilty because it tends to make them look down upon their birth families' celebration.

They may have an actual reason to think badly of their own celebrations as they may have been filled with bad memories. Your foster kid's holidays may have meant out-of-control drinking which led to crisis. This drinking might have been the precursor to arguments and fights, real violence and abuse, possibly sexual abuse. It may have been so stressful that bad language and worse behaviors became associated with what should have been a joyful time of year.

Your foster kids may believe that this is the time when your real feelings for them will be obvious. They could think they might not get any gifts since you don't have to do that. They may feel natural kids in your house will always get much more than they do. This will show your feelings for them and that no matter what you say; they are not just like your own children. In my house this was not the case, my natural kids got less than they should receive so everyone could be equal.

Some of your foster kids will feel a division in their feelings that they cannot manage. They know they should share the holiday with their natural parents, but may also wish to be with you. They feel like they are disloyal to their own parents and this causes a problem for them. When a child feels divided, he cannot be happy. We always gave them the option to do either or both. They could spend the holidays with our family or theirs. Some loved having an extra dinner, more gifts, etc., but for those who had started to connect this was a heart wrenching decision.

This may also be an uncomfortable time for foster kids since families get more emotional and tend to reveal their warm feelings about each other at this time. The closeness you share with your own children and family members points out the lack of good relationships in the foster kid's natural family. When you are hugging or kissing or just being close offer to share with foster kids in a subtle way. Such as, "hey, there's still room" when you are doing a group family hug. Invite, but do not initiate this until it is certain a child wants it even though you know they need it. I very seldom broke this rule since you never know for sure what a child's past was like and closeness may have very bad connotations for them.

The last thing that may unsettle kids is the fact that a great deal of the celebration focuses on religion and your own beliefs. They may not have come far enough to believe as you do and might feel forced to share these ideas. Leave this area open. I believe it is fine to share your views, but never forced them upon kids. If you show by example, your ideas, your religious beliefs will be more evident than when you sit down with the intention of convincing them. Our kids saw us pray for help and guidance, protection, and each other. They saw what we believed without us preaching to them.

Always keep in mind where your kids came from, the types of families they grew up in and the homes they lived in. Put yourself in their place and try to understand that your entire world may be different from theirs. Include them, but understand if they pull away. Keep trying to let them be part of your family and meant to share the holidays. There is nothing like signing your holiday cards and including their names so that the person receiving it knows, the card is from 'your entire family.' If they see a stocking hanging just for them, a name tag with their very own name on the table and presents under the tree for them, it will help them feel they belong there.

It is especially hard for kids who cannot go home for the holidays or have nowhere to go home to. You need to help them feel they are part of your family most of all. So go the extra mile to make kids feel they belong at this time of year. Ignore their foul tempers and distant attitudes. They may be just really hurting inside and need you more than anything to think well of them.

Get them started as early as possible including them in every step of the preparations. Show them the excitement of the holidays, but be patient when their reactions are not what you expect. Inside, they may be in turmoil about what to do and how to act. Just use the love you always give and they will come around. And thanks so much for all the extra care you put into fostering every day.

**Foundation Training for Foster Parents
Winter 2009**

January 10
9:00 to 12:00 Partners in Permanency
1:00 to 4:00 Effects of Fostering on the Family

January 24
9:00 to 12:00 Dynamics of Child Abuse & Neglect
1:00 to 4:00 Effects of Trauma on Child Development

January 31
9:00 to 12:00 Attachment, Separation & Placement
1:00 to 4:00 Guidance & Positive Discipline

February 12
6:15 to 9:15pm Sexual Abuse

February 21
9:00 to 12:00 Family Connectiveness
1:00 to 4:00 Cultural Issues in Placement

All classes held at Waukesha County Dept. of Health & Human Services, 500 Riverview Avenue. Please enter the building at Door #6 and proceed to G137. To confirm your attendance call Shari Rather at 262-548-7267.

This is required training during the first two years of your license.



Jesse's Corner

Jesús Mireles
Manager of the Children and
Family Division

I would like to wish everyone a safe, happy and joyful holiday season! As most of you know this may be a difficult time of the year for some of our foster children. Since they are separated from their family, each child has their own personal experience and memories about the holiday season. This may be less of an issue for the infants and toddlers but for the older children it may be a concern. For those children who had a negative experience, having contact with their parents may increase their anxiety. I would like you to be aware of this and provide whatever support and guidance they may need. Your social worker will be talking to you about scheduling visits during the holidays. Most of our parents want to spend time with their children during the holidays. Our social workers will try to balance the needs of the child, your needs and the rights of the parents to have contact with their children. I would encourage you to talk to your social worker if you have any specific concerns or issues about this. I appreciate your flexibility and willingness to work with us, especially when you are trying to work around your own holiday schedule. We will do our best to make this work for everyone. If you feel that you need more support in responding to your foster child's behaviors during the holiday season, please feel free to talk to your social worker or your foster child's therapist about this. I would like everyone, especially your children and our foster children to have a positive experience during the holiday season.

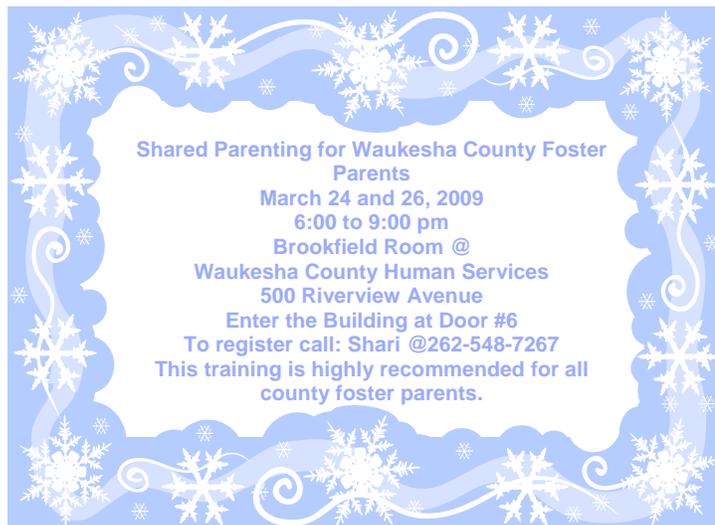
I want to remind you about the upcoming trainings in 2009:

The first session of Foundation Training starts on Saturday January 10 at 9:00 am and will run until 4:00 pm. Please see the newsletter for the complete schedule. Strengthening Families Training is February 7 from 9 am to 4:00 pm at the Center for Learning Excellence this is a going training that will count towards your 10 hours of required training per year. Another ongoing training for those of you who missed Shared Parenting it will be offered again on March 24 and 26 at Health and Human Services from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm (this training is highly recommended for all foster parents). On April 25th, we will offer training on the sexualized child from 9 am to 4 pm again at Health and Human Services. On May 5th, along with our Ribbon of Hope event will hold a training on Lifebooks.

Please mark your calendar for our Foster Parent Annual Meeting Potluck on March 12th from 5:30 pm to 9:00 pm this is your opportunity to hear what is going on in the world of foster care and voice your concerns and have your questions answered.

Once again, have a HAPPY HOLIDAY SEASON!

Jesse



Shared Parenting for Waukesha County Foster Parents
 March 24 and 26, 2009
 6:00 to 9:00 pm
 Brookfield Room @
 Waukesha County Human Services
 500 Riverview Avenue
 Enter the Building at Door #6
 To register call: Shari @262-548-7267
 This training is highly recommended for all county foster parents.

Holiday Stress in Foster Children Strategies for Helping The Foster Child Cope with the Holidays By Crystal Killion

It can be difficult to know what to do, but there are several steps you can take to help a foster child deal with their mixed emotions this time of year.

For most of us the holiday season is full of joy, family, and tradition. However, every year an estimated 513,000 children in the U.S. will spend it in foster care, according to Foster Club.

Lots of Emotions

Unfortunately, for a child in foster care, or for an older adopted child, the holidays bring about feelings of loss, separation, and grief. This is especially true when the child is old enough to have memories from the past seasons. "Children who were removed from their birth families due to abuse, neglect, or substance abuse may associate the holidays with traumatic times," explains Lois Melina in the article, *Holidays Can Bring Up Lots of Emotions*. "Rather than approaching them with a sense of joyful anticipation, these children may unconsciously associate holidays with disappointment or violence."

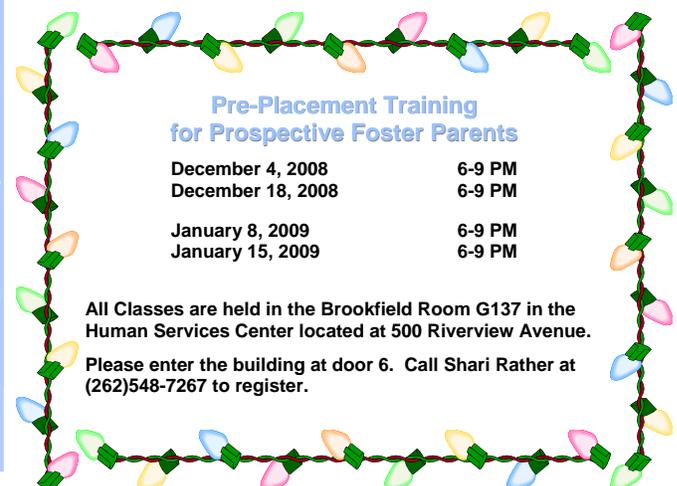
Tips for Helping Them Cope

There are steps you can take to help a child cope with the stresses of the holidays:

- ★ Recognize that what the child is feeling is perfectly normal given the situation. Let him know that you understand and that it is alright to feel the way he does.
- ★ Allow the child to talk about it on their terms—resist the temptation to push her into talking about her feelings or the past, but do not try to avoid it either. If the child has a caseworker, discuss the possibility of getting him into counseling to help him work through his emotions.
- ★ Identify with them. Tell them about a time that you felt as they do. Most of us have experienced a year when our holiday was met with the loss of a loved one or other significant event. Identifying helps the child not feel so isolated in his grief, and my help him to open up to you.
- ★ Get them involved in outside activities. Play dates, sports, holiday activities, volunteering—all help to ward off the sense of sadness that is a common thread for foster and older adopted children this time of year. Keep them active but do keep things balanced. The holiday season tends to lend itself to busyness so use common sense to keep things in check.
- ★ Find ways to incorporate traditions that the birth family participated in that the child can remember. Learn along side the child about her native customs if she is culturally different from the rest of your family. By doing this you give the child a sense of pride and self-worth, and, who knows, you may gain a new family tradition!

You Can Make a Difference

Whether you are a foster parent, an adoptive parent, or know a child who is struggling with the holiday season, you can use these tips to reach out to her and make the holiday a little brighter. You can make a difference!



Pre-Placement Training
for Prospective Foster Parents

December 4, 2008	6-9 PM
December 18, 2008	6-9 PM
January 8, 2009	6-9 PM
January 15, 2009	6-9 PM

All Classes are held in the Brookfield Room G137 in the Human Services Center located at 500 Riverview Avenue.
 Please enter the building at door 6. Call Shari Rather at (262)548-7267 to register.

When a Child Can't Be Home for Christmas

Publication: San Francisco Chronicle

Author: Melissa Smith

12/17/2007—For youth from foster care, the holidays are often a stark reminder of what it means not to have a family. We miss the comfort of knowing we have a place where we are always welcome, year after year. We don't know the family traditions of mom's best tablecloth and china, dad's carving the turkey, grandma's famous stuffing recipe, football in the den with the cousins, or even the inevitable family dramas.

I know these feelings well. I spent six years of my childhood in foster care in California, moving eight different times during this period and separated from my brother, friends and relatives. Foster care had estranged me from my family, so I usually saw them only on Christmas Eve. We would talk and socialize for that one night. But there was no sense of community, no sense of home.

In college, the holiday break was a time to figure out where I would stay. I knew one other foster child who went to my school. However, she dropped out after a couple of years, and then there was only me. Since I didn't have family to be with, I usually stayed with friends—and, because I was independent, I needed to make money to support myself. So I spent the holiday break working to save money for the next semester's financial obligations.

The experience of spending holidays in foster care changes a person's life forever, as I know from my own experience—as well as from my friends and colleagues in Foster Care Alumni of America. Michelle Dalton McGarity, now age 49, recalled, "I hung up the phone, sobbing, the year I was 14. My mother wouldn't take me for Christmas. Not all the begging and pleading could change it. Nobody wanted me. In my foster home, we weren't a family. The foster kids were outsiders looking in. It was one of the two days a year we were allowed to eat at the table with the others, but we saw the glances that told us we didn't belong."

"I am turning 33 years old in two weeks," said Markell Harrison-Jackson. "I have obtained five college degrees, but I have only eaten Thanksgiving dinner in a family setting twice—with my friend's family."

Even when the holidays include a visit with birth families, there are often disappointments. "I was usually able to spend the holidays with one or both of my parents, but when I was 16, I chose to stay in my foster home to see how a "normal" family spent a holiday together," said Jackie Janesh. "My father proclaimed me 'disowned,' and a year passed before we spoke again.

Foster youth may also feel concerned about family members left behind. "I spent the holidays alone and did not get to see my brothers and sisters," Melinda Foy recalled. "I was the only child removed from my home, and I knew that my siblings were still being sexually, verbally and physically abused. Holidays were especially sad for me because I was worried about them."

Even when supportive adults do their best to make the holidays special, feelings of separation can be strong. "I spent nine years with six different families as a foster child. Watching what it was like for them to all get together and reminisce about the years of good times they have all shared together. Knowing that even though these people were kind enough to allow me to join in their celebration, they are not my family, and I am not part of their past. I remember feeling like an outsider at every holiday event," was Sherry L. Gray's reaction.

Along with other young adults who experienced foster care as a child, I see a critical need for federal child welfare financing reform, so that children who are following in our footsteps can be moved swiftly to safe, permanent families, and other youth may avoid the need to enter foster care in the first place.

We want a better life for children now living in foster care. We want the federal government to change the way it funds the child welfare system, so more will be done to prevent abuse or neglect from occurring. We want families to be reunited whenever safely possible. We want to support extended family members who step up to provide valuable stability when the nuclear family cannot meet a child's needs.

People are starting to pay attention. A new brief, "Hoping for a Home for the Holidays," released by Foster Club and Kids Are Waiting, a project of the Pew Charitable Trusts, reports many of the challenges faced by foster children who spend the holidays with unrelated foster families, or in group homes or institutional settings. Foster Club's "Hope for the Holidays" includes a guide to getting through the holidays for foster youth and ideas of ways that foster parents, caregivers, and other supportive adults can help kids get through the holidays.

Now I am married to my college boyfriend, and we have become a family. I

haven't seen my other family during the holidays since I left college, but even today I carry my foster care past with me. Though I know my life will not be just another statistic, it was not easy. Every child deserves a place, a home, a family. Every child deserves the care and support to help them reach their dreams.

Along with more than half a million children currently in foster care and over 12 million adults who came from care, I share one heartfelt holiday wish—that Congress takes action to change the foster care system so other young people will find permanent families and not have to spend lonely holidays the way I did.

Melissa Smith, a former foster youth from Pasadena, is now a graduate student in Psychology at American University. She is a member of Foster Care Alumni of America.

Join Us

**Waukesha County Human Services
Presents: Strengthening Families Training
for Foster Parents
February 7, 2009
Center for Learning Excellence
N4W22000 West Bluemound Rd
9-4
Child Care is available to register:
Call Shari @ 262-548-7267**

Families that are strong and healthy share similar characteristics. Families in the child welfare system often need help to develop or build on these strengths. This training will focus on 6 of these Protective Factors and how you as a foster parent can help the families of the children you foster be better able to protect and care for their children when they return home.



Happy Holidays to our very
Special Foster
Parents

From

The Permanency Services
Staff at Waukesha County
Department of Health and
Human Services

**Jesse, Elizabeth, Linda, Kathe,
Margaret, Steve, Suzie, Kim,
Shari and Lisa**

December 2008 Foster Parent Spotlight

Melissa & Ron Radke



Both Melissa and Ron are from the Waukesha area. They met each other through Melissa's brother, who was a friend of Ron's. This year, 2008 marks their 20th wedding anniversary. For

the past 5 months, Ron has been employed with Genco and as of last year Melissa decided to quit working, so she could stay home with her children and soon become a foster family. The Radke's have two children – Will is 14 and in 9th grade and Sarah is 11 and in 6th grade. Melissa and Ron have a great network that they look to for support including their family, friends, and especially other foster parents. As a family, they enjoy vacationing together, going to sporting events, playing sports, hiking, watching movies, and playing games.

Ron and Melissa had discussed becoming foster parents before they got married. It has always been a dream of Melissa's since she was a teenager. Ron's respected Melissa's decision and agreed that it would be extremely rewarding to be a foster parent and help a child that is less fortunate succeed in the world.

The Radke's have had one placement in their home – three children who were with them for four months. Since their first placement, they have done some respite care for three different foster families and currently do not have a placement.

Melissa and Ron have found foster parenting to be very rewarding but at the same time a challenge. "It's great to see the benefits provided to the children by having a safe, caring, and stable place to be, yet it is difficult not knowing how long the foster children will be with you." The Radke's love the feeling of seeing the children's faces light up with joy and happiness, by things we might take for granted such as a safe and caring home. "Through having foster children in our home our children have grown in love and respect."

The hardest thing the Radke's had to face was having an overload of children in their home. With having two children of their own and then taking on three more they found it to be too much for their family to take on. They loved being able to take the children into their home and provide a safe and loving home for them but not knowing how long they would be there and having five children at one time was overwhelming for Melissa and Ron. "Even though this time was difficult it was a learning experience and very rewarding for both us and our children."

"Always remember you are doing this for the children." "Give yourself and your family breaks, don't try and over do it, this will effect both you and the children."



Contact Numbers:

Waukesha H & HS
262-548-7212

Children's Mental Health Outreach
262-548-7666

Medical Emergency: 911
Family Emergency: 211

Foster Parent Mentors

Nikki Mertens
(12 and under)
262-246-6180

Bette Winkler
(over 12)
262-679-9634

Lisa Roberts, Supervisor
262-548-7271

Shari Rather, Foster Care Coordinator
262-548-7267

Michelle Cornwell, Visitation Coordinator
262-548-7370

October 2008 Placements

Regular Foster Care:

44 Children
0 Admitted
4 Discharged

Treatment Foster Care:

22 Children
0 Admitted
4 Discharged

Group Homes:

6 Children
0 Admitted
0 Discharged

Residential Care Facilities:

5 Children
0 Admitted
1 Discharged

Relative Placements:

31 Children
0 Admitted
1 Discharged

Social Workers:

Suzanne Arnold
262-548-7348

Peggy Beisser
262-548-7261

Kathe Blum
262-548-7275

Jeannine Eng
262-548-7268

Steve Handrich
262-548-7262

Margaret Johnson
262-548-7265

Elizabeth Russo
262-548-7349

Kim Sampson
262-548-7273

Linda Senger
262-548-7698

Ted Wuerslin
262-548-7269

Jennifer Wygle
262-548-7260

We Need You!

For more information about becoming a foster parent in Waukesha County, please contact Shari Rather at:

srather@waukeshacounty.gov

262-548-7267

Or visit our website at www.waukeshacounty.gov
And follow the links to foster care.

