January 2009 Foster Parent Spotlight

Kari Behling

Kari Behling is originally from Lannon, WI but now resides in Milwaukee and for the last year has been employed at the American Association of Children's Residential Centers as the National Director. When Kari was younger she was adopted into what she now calls her family. Kari currently has four children residing in her home Brady 13 and Ariel 11 are Kari's biological children, Jaida 7 was adopted into the family, and an 8 year old foster son.

As a family, the Behlings like to do anything that is active. Their newest foster son is still amazed about how much time they spend outside, and sadly for him, how little time they spend in front of the TV. In the summer, the Behlings like to camp, play sports, bike, swim, and each summer they enjoy a family trip (this year was Mt Rushmore). The Behlings are active in their church and volunteer within the community. Their newest challenge has been working with a Burmese family tutoring them in English. "It's amazing to see how our foster son forgets about his own worries for a short while because he is focusing on helping others."

Kari has always been interested in foster parenting. "It was a calling for me and my family, a calling to serve my community. Even when I thought I was 'done', my children reminded me that we still have a lot to give." Since becoming a foster parent Kari has had many placements, one in which she was able to adopt and currently has an 8 year old boy that has been placed in her family since February of this year.

Being a foster parent has been a work in process for Kari. She has grown from a do-gooder who wanted to save a child or two to someone who truly understands how the influences of society, family history, psychological disorders, substance abuse and our increasingly disjointed society can lead to child welfare involvement. Developing this awareness has helped Kari to become a better foster parent, as well as a better parent in general. If it wasn't for her stable childhood, good job, and strong supporters, she too could have found herself in these children's shoes. "We all could."

Most of Kari's training has come from on-the-job training but throughout the years she has attended many types of training, including PACE and many trauma-informed care workshops. These all have been a great help to her understanding on how fragile children are, and how trauma in their early years can be difficult to identify and overcome. The most rewarding thing about being a foster parent is "watching how loving, compassionate and patient my biological children are when dealing with anyone who appears to be 'different' or is from a dissimilar background. I love how proud they were to introduce the newest member of our family to their friends last February. "It has been truly amazing to watch how just meeting my family has encouraged others to become foster/adoptive families." Kari feels the hardest thing to try and overcome as a foster parent is being disliked by the foster child's biological parent(s) simply because you have their child, although she totally understands. "If someone else was the one who took my child to the first day of school, enjoyed pictures together, cheered on the sidelines of games, and gave kisses to *my* children at bedtime, I would be angry and resentful as well." In the eyes of Kari, shared parenting is a wonderful idea, as it gives the opening to overcome some of those negative feelings.

The advice Kari would like to give to other foster parents is this: "I will never say this is easy, but do not ever talk negatively about your foster child's family, parents, background, or circumstances. Not just to the child, but to your friends, whether its in the grocery store, or at a sporting event, anywhere that the child can hear. When you cut their family down, you chip away at the child's already fragile identity. I've heard of foster parents discussing the drug use of their foster child's mother right in front of them. There is no positive outcome possible when a foster parent does this. Remember, we are here to protect them, and that includes their feelings."

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

November 2008 Placements

Regular Foster Care:
49 Children
5 Admitted
0 Discharged

Treatment Foster Care:
23 Children
1 Admitted
0 Discharged

Group Homes:
6 Children
0 Admitted
0 Discharged

Residential Care Facilities:
5 Children
0 Admitted
0 Discharged

Relative Placements:
29 Children
0 Admitted
2 Discharged

Social Workers:

Suzanne Arnold 262-548-7348
Peggy Beisser 262-548-7261
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.

Jack Safro
Toyota•Ford•Lincoln•Mercury
Lexus•Infiniti•Scion

Foster Care Forum

Waukesha County
Health & Human Services
January 2009

Fostering the Child Witness of Domestic Violence

By Crystalle Williams

Amanda and Michelle, her foster mother, are in the kitchen standing side by side, drying the dishes and talking about their day. Allen, Michelle's husband and Amanda's foster father, walks in from outside. He gives them both a smiling "Hello," grabs an apple, and gives his wife a peck on the cheek as he walks out of the room.

Silence falls. Amanda seems lost in her own world. Then, out of the blue she says to Michelle, "It's good that he doesn't hit you in front of people."

Taken aback by the comment and hoping she had heard wrong, Michelle asks, "What did you say?"

After a pause Amanda says, "It's good that he waits to hit you until I'm not around."

Michelle replies, "Honey, he never hits me."

With a confused look on her face, Amanda says, "But I thought he loved you."

* * * * * * *

Although the names have been changed, this conversation really happened to a friend of mine, a former foster parent. The fact that it did underscores an alarming reality: right now there are children in foster homes all across the country whose experience has taught them that domestic violence (DV) is a natural part of adult relationships.

Foster parents contemplating this fact usually ask two questions" how can I know if the children in my home have been exposed to domestic violence and how can I help them if they have?

What is Domestic Violence?
To answer these questions we must first understand the unique dangers and dynamics of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is defined as, "the establishment of control and fear in an intimate relationship through the use of violence and other forms of abuse including, but not limited to, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, economic oppression, isolation, threats, intimidation, and maltreatment of the children to control the non-offending parent/adult victim." Domestic violence is a behavioral choice that is made by the batterer. The batterer chooses to use power and control tactics, including violence, in family relationships. This is a pattern of behavior that occurs over time. Physical violence is only a part of the dynamic.

Effects on Children
Children who see, hear, or are otherwise aware of domestic violence in their homes experience a broad range of responses. Some appear to be unaffected. Others experience negative development, emotional, psychological, and behavioral consequences.

Short-term effects in children exposed to battering include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep disturbances, separation anxiety, depression, aggression, passivity or withdrawal, distractibility, concentration problems, hypervigilance, and desensitization to violent events. Child observers of domestic violence also tend to have a higher rate of academic difficulties than other children (Weinstein, 2002).

The good news is that once safety and security are provided to these children, symptoms tend to disappear. Studies have demonstrated that, among children exposed to the most severe domestic violence, over 80% tested psychologically normal, were self-confident, had positive images of themselves, and were emotionally well (Weinstein, 2002).

Although much less common, the long-term effects of exposure to battering can include delinquency, higher risk for substance abuse, a propensity to use violence in future relationships, and a pessimistic view of the world. (Weinstein, 2002).

Roles Children Play
As you would expect, children exposed to violence in their homes experience a variety of feelings, fears, and concerns. To deal with these feelings and to survive and function, most children develop coping strategies. Even when they are no longer in that environment, children may continue to use these coping strategies.

In their book *Helping Children Thrive: Supporting Women Abuse Survivors As Mothers*, Linda Barker and Allison Cunningham (2004) explain that in families experiencing domestic violence, children often take on one or more of the following roles that help them and their families cope:

Caretaker. Child is responsible for household duties, child care, homework, etc. Will present as a mini-adult, with parentified behaviors. Even in foster care, this child will often continue attempts to parent siblings.

Confidant to the Victim and/or the Abuser. Child is privy to a parent's feelings, concerns, and plans. Child may serve as a "reality check" for the victim when he or she minimizes or denies that events have occurred . May receive special treatment from the abuser and be told justifications for the abuse. Child may be asked to keep secrets. Child is often rewarded for reporting back on the adult victim's behavior.

Abuser's Assistant. Child is co-opted or forced to assist in the emotional and/or physical abuse of the victim parent.

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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 you attendance call Shari Rather at 262-548-7267.

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

Jesse's Corner

Jesus Mireles
Manager of the Children and Family Division

Dear Foster Parents,

I would like to wish all of our foster families a very healthy and happy new year!

I had an opportunity to review the foster parent re-licensing process with Lisa Roberts, Permanency Services Unit Supervisor and Shari Rather, Foster Care Coordinator. One of the issues I would like to bring to your attention is "maintaining your foster home license" when a placement has not been made in your home. There are many reasons why a foster home may not be used during a given year such as:

- Ensuring the strength and skills of each foster home "matches" the needs of the child and family,
- The number of license homes available to take a child (about 123 foster homes are licensed as of this month),
- The number of children placed in a given year (about 70 children are placed in foster care annually) and
- Placement of children with a fit and willing relative.

If your home has not taken a foster child for the last year, I would like you to review the reasons with our foster care coordinator. Instead of re-licensing your home (it takes about four hours) I would suggest you have your license expire and that you re-apply when you are more available to take a child. The reasons I am suggesting this is due to workload issues. As I mentioned before it takes our foster care coordinator about four hours to re-license your home. In addition, we need to ensure that you are sent notices about foster care issues and information about upcoming training so you can meet your on-going training requirements.

I know all of you went through the licensing process to provide a safe and loving home for foster children and we need your assistance. On the other hand, we do not want you to continue your license (in some cases for years) without having a foster home placement. I would recommend that you let your foster home license expire and reapply later or talk to our foster care coordinator about providing foster care to another county for example Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare

Please sign up for Foundation Training starting January 10 if you need it. The Brookfield Room is small and can only accommodate about thirty people so call Shari at 262-548-7267. We are offering our first on-going training on February 7 at the Center for Excellence located at N4W22000 Bluemound Road from 9 to 4. The topic is Strengthening Families and Peggy Cadd is the trainer. Again, call Shari to register. Child care will be available.

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.

Fostering the Child Witness of Domestic Violence—Continued

Perfect Child. Child tries to prevent the violence by excelling in household duties, school, and other activities, by never arguing, rebelling, misbehaving, or seeking help. This child has little patience for siblings in the home who are not perfect.

Referee. Child tries to mediate tension in the home and keep the peace.

Scapegoat. Child is seen as the cause of the family's problems; child's behavior is used to justify the violence. Child may be special needs, be involved in the juvenile justice system, or a stepchild to the abuser.

Barker and Cunningham note that a single child may play multiple roles. Roles may change over time, or they may play different roles in specific incidents. Depending on the roles they play, children may be forced to choose between the abuser and the victim parent. As a result, they may have feelings of guilt or grief over the things they have done. Understanding what roles the child has played and allowing the child to talk about how he or she has coped is an important first step in understanding how to help. Listening without judgment is key.

Resiliency and Recovery
A number of factors may influence how an individual child responds to being exposed to domestic violence. These factors include the level of violence, the degree of the child's exposure to the violence, the child's exposure to other stressors, and the child's individual coping skills. Not surprisingly, the child's exposure to the violence to other stressors, and the child's individual coping skills. Not surprisingly, the child's age affects his or her ability to cope with exposure to domestic violence: younger children are more vulnerable. The victim's relationship to the child and the presence of a parent or a caregiver to mediate the intensity of the event are also potential factors in a child's reaction (Weinstein, 2002).

The most common indicator of resiliency in children exposed to domestic violence is the strength of the bond with the battered parent, and/or access to a healthy, close relationship with a non-violent adult figure. Perhaps the most harmful thing that can happen to children who witness violence is the destruction of the mother/child relationship (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

What NOT to Say

When talking to a child or adult who is the victim of abuse, choosing the right words is key. Inappropriate or inadequate verbal responses—even if they are not intended to be hurtful—can feel like a second victimization for the person. This can make the initial victimization that much more difficult to resolve. Attitudes or questions that may re-victimize include:

- Disbelief ("Are you sure this happened?")
- Blame ("What did you do to set him off?")
- Cultural insensitivity ("Isn't this accepted in your culture?")
- Judgment ("How can she stay!?")
- Minimizing ("The pain will go away, things will get better.")
  Source: Ganley & Schecheter, 1996; Cromwell, 2003

Identifying the Child Witness of DV
How can you know whether a child you are caring for has witnessed domestic violence? Your first step should be to talk with the child's social worker at the time of placement. If there is an indication domestic violence has occurred, ask the social worker about the harm to the child that was found during the child protective services (CPS) investigation. Case documentation should reflect how the abuser's behavior directly affected the child and how the child views the violence.

Due to the secrecy in which domestic violence thrives, it may be unknown that DV is part of the family dynamic, and the child may enter foster care for another reason. In these cases foster parents or other trusted figures are often the first people the child feels safe enough to tell about the violence.

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If a child begins to disclose domestic violence or any other form of maltreatment, foster parents should listen without judgment; don't tell the child how to feel or what to say. Children don't always need advice, but they do need to vent and problem-solve. Let them use their own words, even if they are offensive to you. Trust can be built here.

Do not promise not to tell anyone what is shared. Rather, say, "I won't share the information unless I feel there is someone who can help. I will tell you who I feel we need to share this information with" (Foster, 2000). Help children identify their own strategies for coping.

Understanding and Helping Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Know that children may feel:

Afraid
- Their mom/dad will be hurt or killed
- They or their siblings will be hurt or killed
- They'll make things worse if they tell
- The battering parent will hate them if they tell

Angry
With the battering parent, the parent being abused, siblings, other family members, and with themselves for not stopping the violence.

Confused
- They may love and hate the battering parent
- They may not know what causes the violence or how to stop it
- They may be unsure whether it is abuse at all

Helpless
- To stop the violence
- To escape the abuse permanently
- To get help for themselves, the batterer, the abused parent, sibling

Guilty
- They believe they cause the violence
- They believe they should intervene but sometimes don't
- They may have unhealthy ways to help them cope, feel better, or "escape"
  Source: NCCWDVC, 2002

To support these children
Identify and support those factors that shield children living in violent homes from harm. Protective factors include:
- Child has positive relationships (with family members, neighbors, and friends) that will support him during a crisis
- Child is self-reliant and willing and able to seek help
- Child's caretaker is willing to seek help for domestic violence
- Caretaker's primary concern is then safety of the child
- Adult victim has good parenting and coping skills
  Source: Ganley & Schechter, 1996

More Things Foster Parents Can Do
If you are caring for a child who has witnessed domestic violence, one of the most important things you can do is to make every effort to model healthy relationships with your spouse, partner, and friends.

That doesn't mean there should never be conflict in your home—disagreements are an unavoidable part of human life, and learning how to resolve them non-violently is a necessary lesson for children to learn. When you argue or disagree, know that the children in your home are watching to see how you and your partner resolve the situation.

Also, be mindful of how you react to common stressors such as losing your parking space, getting rude service at a restaurant, etc. It is common for batterers to react aggressively (cursing, yelling, sarcastic undertones) to everyday stressors, so even if you are not violent, try to model your reactions carefully.

Foster fathers are best positioned to model non-violent fathering, co-parenting, and respect. Be mindful that this may be the first time the children in your home have seen a man react differently to everyday stressors. Reinforce the idea that battering is a choice—people chose to behave violently to solve problems and/or get their way.

Other ways foster parents can help children who have witnessed domestic violence include:

Do what you can to engage in sharing parenting. Many assumptions are made about the decisions that victims of domestic violence make. Often we mistake the battered parent's actions or lack of action as an inability or unwillingness to make decisions and to keep children safe. If they remain in a relationship with the batterer, people sometimes conclude that adult victims don't care about the children or are oblivious to the dangers involved. Please keep in mind that many parents remain in violent relationships because it is the only way they feel they can keep the children safe. Once the relationship is over, a custody battle is likely, and the batterer will often be granted unsupervised visitation of the children, which may increase the risk to the children. Batterers generate all kinds of risk, and there are specific risks associated with staying in the relationship and with leaving (Davies, 1998). Your attempts to understand the battered parent's experiences and protective efforts, even if the person is still in the relationship, will help you better understand how to help the child.

Don't focus on negatives or bad memories. Let children talk freely about their good and bad feelings or memories about the batterer and the abused parent. Batterers are not typically violent every day, so there are some good times that the child may want to tell you about. At the same time, don't force the child to talk.

Be on alert when these children begin to date. This goes for males and females, as they both need to learn the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. The lines of communication must be open without judgment in order for foster parents to be truly effective. Talk to teens about the dangers of dating violence and signs to look for, such as jealousy, isolation, and stalking. Insist on meeting the person and his or her family. Encourage teens to read about dating violence online and to keep themselves informed.

Conclusion
As foster parents, you are in a great position to make a positive difference in the lives of these children. By modeling appropriate conflict resolution, providing nurturance, reserving judgment, and seeking to understand the child's individual experiences, you could be a resiliency factor for a child in your home.

Crystalle Williams, MSW, trains on domestic violence and other topics

The **Milwaukee Bucks** have donated to us 100 tickets to the **Detroit Piston Game** on **February 7 at 7:30** at the **Bradley Center**.

If you would like to attend please call me or email me @srather@waukeshacounty.gov and I will send your tickets to you.

If you take tickets please use them, we will not get donations like this if people do not attend.

Pre-Placement Training for Prospective Foster Parents

January 8, 2009	**6-9 PM**
January 15, 2009	**6-9 PM**
February 5, 2009	**6-9 PM**
February 19, 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.