Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies
Est 1998. Published by Social Care Ireland

Volume 3
Issue 1 *A Celebration of Foster Care, Vol.3, 2002*

Article 11

2002-01-01

Believing in Fostering

Jill Kennedy
Irish Foster Care Association

Recommended Citation
Kennedy, Jill (2002) "Believing in Fostering," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: http://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol3/iss1/11

'Believing in Fostering'

Jill Kennedy

Jill is a mother and foster carer; she is currently studying for her B. Soc. Sc., degree in UCC. She is the chairperson of the Cork Branch of the Irish Foster Care Association.
jillstudent@hotmail.com

Introduction

In Ireland, we have a long tradition of looking after children other than our own. When the need arose, these arrangements were often made through the family network and close-knit community. Fostering is something that came naturally to many families throughout Irish history; grandparents, aunts, other relatives and neighbours have brought up children as their own. This could be due to the death of their parents or parent or for many other reasons. Care in Ireland is now more formal. Families are fragmented and our society is no longer one where extended family lives close together.

I am sure, if we thought about it, we could all look back into our families and find children who were cared for, by relatives, other than their parents. In my own family my grandmother and grandaunt, were raised, from a young age, by their father and two aunts after the death of their mother. They often told me about their childhood and the wonderful aunts that loved them and cared for them and the special relationship she and her younger sister had with their father. These wonderful ladies never married, but dedicated their lives to looking after their nieces; maybe it was this positive attitude and experience in my own family that guided me, quite naturally, to fostering. I felt it was the right thing to do at the time; I still feel it is the right thing to do.

I believe in fostering. Fostering can and does work for many children who cannot live with their own family for whatever reason. I love fostering; it can be such a wonderfully rewarding life. Everyday I experience love, affection and acceptance from many children. I expect this from my own children; I almost take it for granted, but when it comes from another child... When it comes from one of my foster children, it feels as if I have really earned it, and that I deserve it, this is very special and very powerful, something that I have worked hard for, something that I have prayed for.

Recognising the Costs of Fostering

Fostering however, does not come without its cost; the hidden cost of fostering can be very high. I am talking about the cost to my own children. They share their mother -me, my affection and my attention. They share their home, their toys and their rooms. They have made emotional, as well as physical space for other children; children they had never even met before they walked in our door.

We need to be vigilant and allow time for the core family. We need to watch out for signs in our own children that indicate to us that all may not be well. For example, delaying coming home, clingy or sullen behaviour, or a change in personality. All these can be caused for many different reasons apart from fostering but it is our jobs as parents to be watchful and make sure that the fostering experience does not impact negatively on or own children, the 'foot soldiers of the foster care system.' (Cregan & Kennedy, 1999)

Honouring the Commitment of the 'Foot Soldiers.'

'The foot soldiers' - children who care in this way are very special people; they are vital to the fostering life. Without their help and cooperation, I believe, fostering cannot be successful. They are the unsung heroes in the fostering partnership. Young carers can grow up more aware than their peers of the difficulties and problems that other families experience; they live with the reality of family breakdown everyday. In my experience they grow up faster, and are more sensitive to the needs of others than their non-fostering friends. On balancing the positive and negative effects of fostering on my own children, I firmly believe that they have gained in a way that would never have happened without fostering. They are the winners.

Despite any negative effects on our own children, very often, a foster child can change your life in such a positive way, in a way you never expected... It's the hugs of enthusiasm that are automatic when you come in the door. It's the smiles made and shared. It's the unconditional love and complete trust we share. This may not happen with every foster child, but has happened in our home with more than one foster child, making it worthwhile for all the family. In the words of one of the 'foot soldiers,' who I am proud to say is also one of my own daughters,

> *"It's the little things. I love being a youth who fosters. I have shared my parents, my family, my bedroom, my life, my love, and my last rolo. Everything! I can't put into words the feelings shared with a hug, a kiss or just a smile. No words are needed to show love..."*
>
> (Kennedy, 2001., this issue)

Studies have shown that foster carers, in general, are stricter on their own children than they are on the foster children. (Poland and Groze, 1993. Lemieux, 1984. Wilkes, 1974.) We need to ask ourselves, 'Why' this might be? Do we expect more from our own children? Do we expect them to be better behaved or even more helpful? Yes, I think we do, we expect our own children to show a good example to our foster children, is this fair? Children in families have to learn to share and this is especially true of large families, and even more so of fostering families. It often results in our own children being given less attention than the foster children because there is an assumption that they are alright. (Cregan & Kennedy, 1999)

My interest in the effects of fostering on foster carer's own children goes back many years. This interest was rekindled at a workshop I attended at the International Foster Care Conference in Canada in 1997 presented by a group of three foster carers from Cork. Following this, Mairie Cregan, one of the original presenters, and myself, continued to look into the subject in far more detail and present our findings at local, national, European and international fora. It is very heartening to see that further interest in this particular subject has escalated as can be seen by the number of studies and similar research that has been carried out in more recent years. One study that caught my attention in particular, was done by Sheila Ryan, a senior fostering social worker in the Kerry region. Her findings, which were similar to ours, are published in, 'Hand in Hand', the book of proceedings from the IFCO European Foster Care Conference, Ireland, 2001. Shela Ryan also highlights the central role of 'children who foster,'

> *"Whilst many foster care departments review foster carers annually and elicit views of foster carers at regular child care review, rarely do the foster carers' children participate at these reviews, nor are their views sought. This is something that requires consideration by agencies so that the importance of foster carers' children is truly acknowledged and their contribution to fostering reviews actively pursued."*
>
> (Ryan S., 2000, pg. 66)

I believe that foster carer's children very often have a lot of positive experiences and views that could be shared with the foster child's social worker, which could help the agency have a broader understanding of the success of the placement. We need to work together to develop a forum for the voices of the 'foot soldiers' to be heard within in the system where they are practically invisible:

> *"I think that the fostering system has yet to highlight the importance of youth carers and yet to include and honour the vital role of youth carers. I think that I should have an input into what happens in my home!"*
>
> (Kennedy, 2001)

Creating Systems of Support Within Foster Care

Fostering has to have a community of it's own. Foster carers need the support of other foster carers, because the role of sharing your life and family with others is a very personal thing to do. It is very hard to talk to someone who is not involved or has not experienced the ups and downs, hardships and love in foster care, and from foster care. Fostering is an extremely difficult task. (If it was easy, we would not have the shortage of carers that prevails everywhere at the moment,) However, I firmly believe in fostering, it is a job that has to be done because, all children deserve to live in a functioning family environment, and have the opportunity to be cared for, loved, valued, and accepted for themselves. In being foster carers the need for real support is a long established truth:

> *"Foster carers need to be supported and helped to understand and work through the impact that a foster child's behaviour can have on their own children, rather than expecting their children to accept it."*
>
> (Ryan, S., 2000, pg. 67)

In the area where I live and work we have been able to create for ourselves a most wonderful network of support. We help each other by listening, comparing stories, sharing experiences. This informal network can be a lifeline if things get tough. Sometimes a problem doesn't seem quite so serious when it is shared with somebody who understands. Our group, 'The circle of friends,' is made up of Foster carers, social workers, birth parents, educators, children who foster and children who are fostered. One of the most striking realisations which has come about for me through this group, is the realisation that all of the children and youth involved in the caring system and foster family share real similarities in their worries and dreams for the future:

> *"The parallel issues found by foster children, and birth children through the 'Circle Of Friends,' has given them a clearer understanding of what they have in common, and what they can solve together, rather than what they have to endure alone."*
>
> (Circle Of Friends, 2001)

Believing in the Future

I believe in fostering. Fostering has given me some of the greatest gifts in my life. I intend to continuing fostering for a very long time and to share in the lives of these wonderful children and young people, of whom, I have the privilege of rearing and sharing my family with. My family are not limited by bonds of blood, but by the closer bond of love.

References:

Circle of Friends, 2001, 'From Webs of distraction to systems of concern.' A one day course presented at the International Foster Care Organisation Bi-annual Conference in Holland.

Cregan.M, & Kennedy.J, 1999. 'Playing both ends against the middle.' A research paper presented at the International Foster Care Conference in Melbourne, Australia.

Kennedy, Jean, 2001, 'Youth Caring. 'It's the Little Things...' in this issue.

Ryan, S. (2000) 'The impact of fostering on foster carers children.' in Hand and Hand, book of proceedings, IFCO European foster care conference, Ireland.