

dandelion

Issue 03
October 2016

Life in the foster system

Charell, a former foster youth, shares her thoughts on supporting a child in care

You feel blindsided, powerless and fearful all the time. Some people are bold enough to ask outright, What did you do? Others will let their dismissive smiles do the talking for them. This is life as a child in the foster care system, and if you're a foster parent, you need to be prepared.

Ever had a grade school friend tell you that they're not allowed to play with you anymore because you come from a "bad" home? Or been the only kid in class not invited to a birthday party? Or even had your boss say the words, "I would have never guessed that about you!" when the topic of upbringing comes up in your office? I have.

There is so much that foster youth don't get to say, but we wish that people knew about us. We're not damaged, but we probably are a little heartbroken. Adults, and foster parents in particular, should know that a broken heart takes a long time to heal.

Foster youth are just kids with hopes and dreams who want the same things all kids want—a safe home and people who love them. But it's not nearly so simple.

Here are my top five things, that I want foster parents to know about foster youth.

We Probably Won't Trust You For A While

When I was a senior in high school there was a teacher who rubbed me the wrong way. He never did anything to me, but something made me keep my distance. After a few months he noticed, and asked me why I didn't like him. I responded, "It's not that I don't like you. It's that I don't trust you." I remember he looked visibly shocked by my honest answer, but didn't make any retorts. A few months later he was dismissed from the school for having an "inappropriate relationship" with a female





student.

Learning when to trust people and when to keep people at arms-length is a survival skill you develop living in foster care. We get let down a lot. It's usually by the adults who we are supposed to be able to trust unequivocally. As a result, we tend to rely heavily on our gut reaction to strangers and not let people get too close.

That being said, we don't like having to be on guard all the time, and want to let people in. We may be hesitant to trust at first, but all it means is we need to spend time getting to know you and want you to spend time getting to know us. Small things like being honest with us, not being judgmental of our situation and being true to your word will go a long way in helping us know that we can let you in.

We Have An Acute Sensitivity for Fairness

One of my foster moms had three kids of her own—two biological and one adopted—and she worked nights (as a nurse, I think). As long as we all did our chores every night, she would make pancakes for us before we went to school each morning. We little kids were responsible for things like wiping down the kitchen table and sweeping the floors and her oldest son was responsible for doing the dishes. I remember her giving us cold cereal one morning when she arrived home because the dishes hadn't been cleaned. Her biological son tried to convince her that she should make us pancakes anyway, but she stuck to her guns. She said, the deal was all the chores had to be done—no exceptions. Pancakes are my favorite breakfast food, so I was pretty bummed that morning. But what stuck with me is that she didn't give her son a pass. I knew then that

she was someone I could trust and would treat me fairly.

Our beliefs get shaken to the core growing up in foster care. We desperately need to feel (and know) that we won't get treated unfairly—because we probably have been for most of our short lives. We need to know that we'll be treated the same way as everyone else, and that you treat everyone else like you treat us.

Love is A Balancing Act For Us

I became close with one of my foster mothers and would call her “mom.” I'd refer to her that way to everyone, except my “biological mom.” One day, when I was talking to my bio mom on the phone, my foster brother overheard me reference my foster mom (his bio mom) as “Ms. Knight.” After the call he told me that I was trying to be “slick.” I was about 7 or 8 at the time, and remember trying to awkwardly laugh off his comment, and feeling really awful about it for days.

He was right. I didn't want my bio mom to know that I called my foster mother “mom.” I knew it would hurt her feelings. And, I didn't want my foster mom to know that I didn't refer to her as “mom” in front of my bio mother. When you're a foster youth you spend a lot of energy trying to make sure other people not feel bad about your “situation.” You want to protect everyone's feelings and may have to wrestle with the guilt of becoming attached to your foster family. It's confusing, and it's way more stress than any youth should have to deal with. We need you to know that we're always walking this “love tightrope,” and to remind us that we're not in danger of losing our bio parents' love, or yours.



We Spend A Lot Of Time Afraid

We're scared that you won't be nice to us, afraid that we won't be able to live with our parents again, terrified that we'll be sent back to our parents but that they won't be "better," petrified that kids in school will make fun of us, horrified that no one will tell us what's really going on, and frightened out of our minds from thinking that, even when we grow up, our lives won't be any different.

I carried all this fear around for a very long time, mainly because no one ever talked to me about it. I wish someone had said to me, Your life is really hard right now, but it won't always be. One day, you'll get to decide who you want to be and what type of life you want to live. And you'll get to make the choices to make it a good one. That may not have alleviated my every fear, but it would have replaced some of my fear about the future with a little hope, and something to plan for.

We Never Forget The People Who Were Good To Us

When I was in either third or fourth grade, we did a class play on turn-of-the-century immigrants moving to the United States. Before you start thinking, wow that's a heavy subject matter for eight-year-olds, keep in mind that the "play" was no longer than 15 minutes, and we sang "Getting To Know You" from The Sound Of Music in it.

On show day, our parents were supposed to make us look like "immigrants" from the early 1900s. My foster mom dressed me in a church hat, one of her blouses, and a skirt that I had to carry as I walked because it was so long on me. Before we left for school she said to me, "All immigrants weren't poor," and then we walked out the door.

I didn't think much of her comment until I got to class and heard a classmate say, "You must be a rich immigrant." Apparently, all the other parents had torn holes in their clothes and given their kids things to wear that were on the older side. I stood out that day in my oversized but shiny top, skirt and cute hat. All morning, before the play I would make the reply, "All immigrants weren't poor," whenever someone would make a remark about my

costume.

This memory always makes me smile. There are lots of reasons why my foster mom might have decided not to send me to school looking like my classmates that day, but I like to imagine that she was simply thinking, That teacher must be insane, if she thinks I'm going to tear up my clothes and send her out of this house looking crazy!

See, my foster mom was a great mom, and never made me feel secondary, in all the time I lived with her. I don't remember her helping me memorize my lines for that play, but I know she did. I can't remember what her dinners tasted like anymore, or her favourite color, but I remember the way I'd feel after one of her hugs.

I think I remember this story so vividly because she made me feel pure joy that day. I was acting in my first play; my mom had helped me practice, and she was going to be there to watch me perform. I knew she was happy for me and proud of me, so the costume was irrelevant.

There's an old adage, People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. And believe me, this is especially true for foster youth.

We do remember the people who were unkind to us, but we cherish the ones who brought moments of love, joy and normalcy to our lives.

Keeping these things in mind will go a long way toward helping foster parents build stronger relationships with their foster youth. Just because a heart has been broken, doesn't mean that it can't remember how to love.

about the author

Charell Star possesses an entrepreneurial spirit that led her to create the popular business and lifestyle blog Not Just a Girl in a Dress. The lifestyle expert also contributes content to eHow, Sister 2 Sister Magazine, MommyNoire, and SheKnows, and works as a style ambassador, on camera talent and influencer for leading brands. This native New York City girl loves sharing her expertise with her loyal readers, working with hip brands on campaigns, and hosting business or style events. When she's not doing that, Charell is speaking to and motivating organizations around the country. Visit her at www.charellstar.com

