



ME AND MY SECOND FAMILY: WHEN CHILDREN LIVE IN FOSTER CARE

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



NEHA

AGE: 13



THE
MEADOW
COMMUNITY
PRIMARY
SCHOOL

AGES: 10–11



ZOYA

AGE: 14

Sometimes children cannot stay with their biological (birth) parents. This may be because their parents are ill or are unable to look after their children due to challenges the parents are facing. In such cases, foster families can step in to help. A foster family is like a second family where children can live temporarily or until they grow up. The tasks of foster parents are the same as those of any parent: they play with the children, offer emotional support, help with homework, provide food and drink, and ensure a safe home environment. Nevertheless, moving to a new family is a big change and can be challenging. Some children may be angry or sad, have difficulty trusting new people, or may have experienced bad things. Most importantly, however, children and foster parents are not alone in these situations. There is a

large team, called the foster care system, which ensures that children and parents feel their best.

WHY CAN SOME CHILDREN NOT STAY WITH THEIR OWN PARENTS?

Parents have a great responsibility for their children, until children grow up to be adults. In Germany and the United States, for example, children are considered adults when they turn 18. Rules called **child welfare** laws state that parents must keep their children safe, healthy, and well cared for. Parents must prepare children for an independent life.

Sometimes being a parent can be very difficult. Some parents may find it hard to take care of their children. It is important to know that this is never the child's fault. These children have done nothing wrong to result in their parents' inability to take care of them. Instead, it could be because the **biological parents** have never learned how to look after their children or have mental health problems. Parents with addiction problems, for example, find it difficult to stop using drugs or *alcohol*, even if they are harming themselves or their children. Some parents struggle with depression—they may be constantly sad or lack the energy to complete daily tasks, including taking care of their children. Other parents are very young and have little support. Others have no jobs and little money for food or live in environments that are unsafe or unhealthy for children. Some parents argue frequently and loudly with each other or with their children or even physically hurt each other or their children. This is very dangerous and traumatic for children, and childhood **trauma** can cause serious mental health problems.

In all these cases, a judge may decide it is better for the child to live somewhere else for a while or until they grow up. The judge may decide that living with other family members (such as grandparents), in a children's home, or in **foster care** is the best option for the child. The child's welfare, meaning what is best for the child, always comes first. Just as a plant needs good soil and water, a child needs a loving family to thrive and develop properly [1].

WHAT IS A FOSTER FAMILY?

Foster families are special families that take care of children who cannot stay with their biological families. Foster families can give children a sense of security and happiness. Think of a foster family as a kangaroo with a big pouch with lots of space (Figure 1). This pouch is like a safe, cozy, and loving home where children can flourish. Foster

CHILD WELFARE

Ensuring that children are safe, happy, and grow up well. This includes their physical, emotional, and social health and the fulfilling of their needs and rights.

BIOLOGICAL PARENTS

The mom and dad who gave birth to a child. These parents pass their genes, for example hair color, to the child, even if they are not the ones raising or caring for the child.

TRAUMA

A very bad experience (e.g., violence or death of a loved one) that causes fear, stress, or helplessness and is hard to process without professional help, often leaving long-lasting effects.

FOSTER CARE

A home for children who cannot live with their biological parents for safety or other reasons. Specialists ensure that the children receive optimal care, stability, and support.

Figure 1

You can think about a foster family like a kangaroo, with a big, cozy pouch where children can grow up feeling safe, loved, and strong. Image created by the Audiovisual Media Center.



Figure 1

parents help children in difficult times and enable them to grow up feeling good and strong.

Foster families exist in many countries. In Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, there are two main types of foster care: temporary care and permanent care. Temporary foster care means that children are placed with a foster family for a specific period of time, often until the biological parents can look after the child again or until a permanent foster family is found. Permanent foster care is when children stay with a foster family for a very long time, usually until they become grownups.

HOW IS FOSTER CARE DIFFERENT FROM ADOPTION?

Both foster care and adoption offer children a safe and loving home when they cannot grow up with their biological parents. Even if children stay with the foster family permanently, the child's biological parents are usually still part of the child's life and still legally considered the child's parents. This means that the biological parents must be involved in all important decisions affecting the child, such as decisions about major medical treatment or moving abroad.

In the case of adoption, the child's biological parents generally do not take part in the child's life and no longer have any legal rights or responsibilities for the child. The adoptive parents become the child's new legal parents and take over all the duties of parenthood.

CHALLENGES IN DAILY LIFE

Every foster child brings a symbolic backpack with them to their foster family, filled with bad past experiences and memories (Figure 2). Each of us carries such a backpack. The fuller it is, the heavier it is to carry. Good experiences, interests, or the feeling of being loved, give us a sense of security and strengthen us. They are tools that give us courage, aid in challenges, and lighten the load of the backpack.

Figure 2

Foster children often carry a symbolic backpack, filled with their past experiences and memories. This backpack can be heavy and hard to carry if the children have had bad experiences in the past. Image created by the Audiovisual Media Center.



Figure 2

However, many foster children have had bad experiences in the past. These experiences are like heavy burdens that they must carry in their backpacks. Just being separated from their biological families, friends, or their familiar homes can be very stressful and traumatic. Sometimes children have witnessed frequent verbal or physical fights between their parents or witnessed other traumatic events. They are often very worried about their parents,

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

When thoughts, feelings, or behaviors make it hard to cope with daily life, like feeling very sad, anxious, or stressed for a long time. Treatments can help patients feel better.

PLACEMENT CHANGE

A foster child moves from one foster family to another. This happens when the current foster family is no longer suitable, for example due to problems or changes.

SOCIAL WORKER

They help people in tough situations, like family or money problems, by offering advice, support, and finding solutions to improve their lives.

and sometimes they have developed physical or **mental health problems** themselves. These health problems include things like **fetal alcohol syndrome disorder**, **attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder**, **anxiety disorder**, or **attachment disorders**. Some children find it difficult to concentrate, trust others, or control their **emotions**. It is perfectly okay to have these feelings! Children are allowed to be sad, angry, and **disappointed**. It is important that children are not alone in such situations and that doctors and therapists support them.

Often, it takes time for both the foster children and the foster parents to learn about these problems. This makes it even harder to carry the backpack, and foster parents often do not know how to help carry the backpack and relieve the child. This can lead to despair for both foster children and foster parents. Children's books like *Kids Need to Be Safe: A Book for Children in Foster Care* provide good insight into how foster children experience the foster care situation [2].

CHALLENGES OF CHANGING FOSTER FAMILIES

Sometimes a foster child must move from one foster family to another. This can happen if the current foster family cannot handle the challenges that result from the foster child's backpack full of terrible experiences. Other times, the child does not feel comfortable in the foster family. A move to another family is called a **placement change**. Changing families can be quite challenging and confusing [3, 4]. It may become increasingly difficult for the foster child to trust people for fear of losing them or due to moving again—just like a plant has great difficulty taking root if it is repeatedly torn out of the ground and replanted. Every time children move, they have to say goodbye to everything and everyone they know and care about. It may be difficult for them to do well in school or make new friends. Children may be angry, upset, or have difficulty controlling their emotions if they do not have a steady home. Such changes can understandably cause the child a lot of fear and worry. However, frequent placement changes do not mean that the child will never have a stable family, and not all foster children experience placement changes. Most foster children find a loving and stable home with a foster family that offers them safety and support. And most importantly, foster children and foster parents are not alone! There are people who help foster children and foster families when things become challenging.

THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

An entire team of people works together to help children who cannot live with their biological parents! This team is called the foster care system, and it has several components. First, there are **social workers**, who are like coaches on this team. They often work for a state

YOUTH WELFARE OFFICE

An organization tasked with looking after the welfare and rights of children and adolescents. It offers advice, support, and protection for foster children and families.

or community organization, such as a **youth welfare office**. Social workers decide which foster family is suitable for the child and they supervise and advise the families. They ensure that the foster family has everything they need to take good care of the child. They also talk to the biological parents to support them and encourage them to maintain contact with their child.

In addition, teachers, doctors, attorneys (also called solicitors), and therapists support the children in carrying their backpacks. They help to find strategies to overcome problems and deal with negative experiences so that the children feel good again, develop well, and become healthy. Sometimes, independent organizations or associations are assigned by the youth welfare office to look after the foster family. These organizations offer support to foster parents and foster children and give them opportunities to get to know other foster parents and foster children. Everyone involved in foster

Table 1

How research can benefit foster children.

Topic	Research findings	How can help be provided?
<i>Brain and body</i>	<p>Bad experiences early in life can negatively affect our bodies, brains, and genes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early stress can change brain areas that are important for remembering things and learning. • If children were poorly cared for as babies, they are less able to cope with stress as adults. • Frequent placement changes can make foster children feel unsettled and force their brains to constantly adjust to new environments, which can negatively impact how their brains function. 	Foster parents and therapists can provide support and techniques to reduce stress and help children to work through and cope with bad experiences.
<i>Emotions</i>	<p>Foster children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are brave and strong • Feel sad or worried more often than children who always stayed within their biological families 	When foster parents and other adults give love, patience, and kindness, it can make a big difference, helping children feel stronger, happier, and more confident.
<i>School and job</i>	Due to increased difficulties remembering and a lower ability to solve problems, some foster children have problems at school or in finding (and staying in) a good job.	With the right support and a caring foster family environment, many foster children can achieve just as much as other children.
<i>Intervention research</i>	Intervention research is when scientists try to find new ways to help children feel better or solve problems.	Special programs, like therapy or tutoring, are designed to help foster children feel better, do well in school, and learn how to manage tough feelings.

Table 1

care works together to ensure that each child's situation continues to improve.

Although each child's story is unique, the goal remains the same: to create a safe, nurturing environment in which every child can thrive. Foster care is a community effort to ensure that every child feels valued and loved and has the chance to reach their full potential. To discover how scientific research can further benefit foster children, see [Table 1 \[5\]](#).

In conclusion, this article explains why foster children cannot live with their biological parents. Difficult life situations of the parents are often the reason why children are placed in foster families, who offer them protection and care. A change of family can be very stressful for the children, as they must get used to new surroundings. It is therefore crucial that foster children remain in a stable and loving family and get sufficient support so that they can experience security, trust and positive development.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST: US and LE work for the Federal Association of Foster and Adoptive Families (PFAD Bundesverband e.V.), which has set itself the goal of supporting foster and adoptive children and their parents throughout Germany.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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YOUNG REVIEWERS

NEHA, AGE: 13

I am currently reviewing the article "Me and My Second Family: When Children Live in Foster Care". In terms of my family, I live with my parents, my younger brother, and our dog. Growing up, I have always been passionate about sports and staying active. Whether it is swimming with my family or playing volleyball with friends, I find joy in being on the move and engaging in physical activities.

THE MEADOW COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL, AGES: 10–11

Our group consists of enthusiastic children from across Key Stage 2 at The Meadow Community Primary School, led by Dr. Zavaleta. They are eager to participate and meet scientists; as they say, "science is a cool subject". We hope to provide opportunities to learn about Science as a lens to help us to understand the wider world through, use it to inspire awe and wonder, and as a key to making positive change for our future.

ZOYA, AGE: 14

I live with my mother, father, and older sister in a family home. Surrounded by greenery, I have grown fond of the springtime where I can bike on the streets and go on runs outside. Additionally, I love to swim and enjoy reading and drawing in my spare time. Just recently, I celebrated my completion of middle school, so I embrace all the good things that have come thus far and ready myself for what is ahead.



AUTHORS



ALINA THERESA HENN

I am a post-doctoral scientist at RWTH Aachen University in a team that studies how the brain works and develops in children. I am especially interested in finding ways to help foster parents manage stress so that, in the long run, both parents and children can thrive in a healthy and happy foster family environment. Right now, I am also exploring how mental health apps can help children feel better and what risks might come with using these apps. In addition to my research work, I am training as a psychotherapist for adults, and I help people in hospitals and clinics cope with their thoughts and feelings.



KERSTIN KONRAD

I am a professor of clinical child neuropsychology at the RWTH Aachen University/Germany and the Research Center Juelich. I study how the brain develops from infancy to young adulthood and what happens if brain development goes awry. With my work, I also hope to help children who have gone through tough times in their early lives to improve their emotion regulation abilities and wellbeing! Working together with foster families is one of the most rewarding aspects of my clinical work.



ULRIKE SCHULZ

I am a foster mother. My husband and I have raised five children. Two of them were foster children. I have been involved with PFAD, the Federal Association of Foster and Adoptive Families in Germany, for many years and am the national chairwoman. We fight for the rights, needs, and best possible support for foster and adoptive children and their families. We provide information, training, and advice, and create opportunities for families to get to know each other. We also work with experts, politicians, and scientists to provide children with the best conditions for a happy life.



LUISE ESSEN

I am a special consultant at the Federal Association of Foster Children and Foster Families (PFAD). Together with Ulrike, I worked on a research project with the RWTH Aachen University that aimed to support foster parents and foster children. Before that, I worked as a consultant at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, the German Red Cross Headquarters, and other German family organizations.



MARTIN LEMOS

I am the head of the media center at the RWTH Aachen University/Germany. Our institute develops interactive digital media, like apps, virtual reality, and games, for medical students and researchers (and sometimes for patients) from our university. I am also an educational researcher and lecturer with a specialization in medical and digital education.



LAURA BELL

I am a post-doctoral researcher at the media center of the RWTH Aachen University who is interested in science, scientific illustration, and science communication. This means that I not only conduct research but also want to ensure that we as researchers communicate our research well to other researchers, and also to people who are not (yet) researchers, such as children and young people. Besides research, I love being outside, doing sports, photography, and drawing—for example, illustrations for this article. *lbell@ukaachen.de