

A Family Created in Many Ways: Parents and Four Children Who Became Family Through Adoption, Fostering, and Birth

Dawn and Rich thought they could never give birth to their own children, and they endured six and a half years of hoping for a pregnancy. Together, they came to the conclusion that they would adopt to begin their family. After looking at adoption options, they made the decision to adopt from the foster care system. That began their unique journey into parenting.

They now have a family of four: an adopted son and daughter, a birth daughter, and a daughter whom they have fostered for a long time and share parenting with her birth mother. Their ages range from four to 10.

My interview began with a visit to their well decorated, neat house. It is apparent that children live there because their home, which backs up to a ravine, sports colorful yard toys in the front yard. I talked with Dawn, while her four-year-old daughter sat nearby.

Their first child, Chase, who is now 10, came into their home just two months short of his second birthday. They adopted Chase as a special needs child from the foster care system. Chase was a boy whose behavior Dawn described as ranging from quiet to wild when he first came into their home.

Parenting him was not always easy. He was

kicked out of daycare for biting.

But with extra support, his behavior has become more consistent and appropriate. He is doing well as a fourth grader. His mom proudly says that they have not received one phone call this year about his behavior and sees this as a significant indication of just how well he is doing and how much he has adjusted to the demands of school.

Rich brought the new bike home and was about to show Dianna how to ride. But he decided that Dianna's mom also needed to be there to share the moment, so they called her so she could enjoy seeing her daughter take her first bike ride.

Although he still receives special educational services because he is emotionally delayed and has ADHD, she says he excels. attended Camp UNALYA this summer and loves the summer programs offered by the park department.

Dawn told a sweet story about Chase's progress. One day at recess, he was talking to a girl and another boy said Chase shouldn't talk to her. He continued to speak to the girl, and the boy hit him. Rather than strike back, Chase told the playground supervisor. This was a big step for him.

To their surprise, Dawn and Rich found themselves expecting a child in the January following Chase's adoption. They gave birth to Jenna, who is now seven. She is doing well in the third grade and loves school.

Dawn and Rich brought their daughter, Savannah, home from the hospital when she

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was two days old. She was adopted from the foster care system and is now three. Dawn describes Savannah as a happy child who has shown no psychological or emotional delays. She snacked on dry cereal while quietly watching Sesame Street during our interview. Initially shy, she talked with me at the end of the interview. She will be home with Dawn, who is a full time mother, for another year before she begins school.

There is also Dianna, another important member of their family. Dawn and Rich foster Dianna and share parenting with Dianna's mother. Dianna is eight and in third grade. While Dianna finds school to be a struggle and has learning disabilities classroom support, her life is remarkably happier than it was when she first moved into Dawn and Rich's home, and she is adjusting well.

When Dawn and Rich began fostering Dianna at the age of three, she did little else but scream. She screamed day and night. Needless to say, Dawn was stretched to her limits.

Rich, who Dawn says is a great father, took over for her when he could to give her a break. Dawn tells of singing Jingle Bells in the middle of July during bath time, because it seemed to quiet Diana a bit.

The screaming lasted for six months. Dawn and Rich persevered, and have a family member who now says she has two moms. Dianna calls her birth mom as well as Dawn, "Mom." No one questions this double identity, and Dianna is perfectly comfortable with this.

Although medically frail, Dianna's mother manages to hold a job in a sheltered workplace and can drive her own car. She has Dianna every weekend and talks to Dawn and Dianna daily.

But Dianna is an integral part of Dawn and Rich's household too. Dianna is on all of the

family pictures. And her mother is also part of the life of this family.

As an example of just how well co-parenting works for them, Dawn told me about how they handled buying a new bike for Dianna and taught her to ride. Rich brought the new bike home and was about to show Dianna how to ride. But he decided that Dianna's mom also needed to be there to share that moment with Dianna. They called her so she could enjoy seeing her daughter take her first bike ride. Dawn, Rich and Dianna's mom are a wonderful example of how well shared parenting can work for a child, the birth mom and the fostering parents.

Dawn has kind words for the foster care coordinator and the county with whom they work. She finds help is always available. She says her coordinator is wonderful. Dawn and Rich continue to do respite care for the county and may be open to another foster placement.

The coordinator likes working with them and paid Dawn the ultimate compliment that she would like to be the kind of person Dawn is.

Has creating a blended family been easy?

Although Dawn and Rich love how they have blended their family, Dawn says it also can be hard. She talked about the sadness and guilt that they felt when they decided they could not continue to parent two brothers whom they had fostered. They found it very hard to give the 30-day notice to their county to find another placement for the boys who they had fostered for nine months. They had to put their family first and made the difficult decision that the placement was not working.

Dawn and Rich lead a rich life that is full of giving. Fostering, adopting and shared parenting add a dimension to their family that requires a lot of love, flexibility and willingness to give above the ordinary.

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What advice does Dawn have for those who are thinking about fostering?

- She recommends that potential foster parents be ready with open hearts.
- Dawn finds their whole experience worth it. She finds what parents can do for kids is amazing. When you see what you do, and what a stable environment does for children, it all becomes worth it.
- Know that, in reality, people who foster may experience difficult challenges in the process and that you may well grieve.
- Know that the process of being placed in foster care is hard on children, and that you may find these children crying many nights.
- You need to be being strong and to have strong people behind you.
- And last, but not least, work as a couple. Dawn and Rich seem to do just that.

