

## Our Foster Care & Adoption Journey: Lessons Learned

By Mike Heath, Coalition/FCARC

*A personal account from Jack Hankes, foster and adoptive parent from Wisconsin. This story was adapted from a speech that Jack Hankes presented at a Journey Home event in 2011.*

I would like to share my thoughts and perceptions about fostering and adoption with you. My wife, Deborah Hankes, and I were innocent, frankly, when we began fostering in the mid-90s, and we've had approximately 20 foster kids since. Three of them now share our last name.

It has been an interesting avocation. I would like to begin by sharing a couple of thoughts about fostering.

First, understand that foster parents are no different than birth parents in a lot of ways—we want children in foster care to be successful, we want them to be self-confident, and we want them to achieve good things. We encourage them to look forward rather than backwards. Birth parents want these things for their kids, too.



These kids can be like M&Ms, though, with a colorful and hard outer shell, with insides soft and able to melt. That said, there are some fairly consistent truisms that I would like to offer:

- Some children are suspicious and they trust no one.
- Right and wrong look too much alike.
- Their birth parents teach the earliest and probably the most lasting of life's lessons, but some of those lessons are not necessarily

the way in which we would have chosen to teach some of life's important lessons.

- They find themselves in a perpetual quest for control because it is the only way they'll ever know what's

coming next.

- Sadly, we don't know that they trust us—until they cry.

I have opined on occasion that fostering is among the most difficult and rewarding things we've ever done, and despite the fact that some of these kids present an array of challenges, I've never known a social worker or foster parent willing to throw in the towel on them.

Continued on page 2

Although foster and birth parents have a lot in common, fostering does involve a few wrinkles.

- For example, when you get the love of a child, it is a wonderful thing, but our tendency is to temper that joy with the understanding that it's only a loan. For many of these kids, birth parents remain the goal.
- That said, these kids don't judge birth family like we might, and they can overlook a lot of things.
- We know that trust can be emotionally expensive, and that we'll never get it for free.

We've long felt that the lasting effect of a foster placement might be, just might be that we gave them a glimpse of what life is supposed to be like, and that they'll tuck that away in a safe place and use it to model their lives later.

### Adoption

As far as adoption, Deborah and I can't imagine adopting without first fostering, but we know that happens all the time. As adoptive parents, we struggled along with our two sons.

Ryan, now 20, and Daniel, now 18 came into our lives at ages five and three. We were Ryan's sixth foster home. At the handoff, grandma described him as 'spirited,' an adjective we later decided was woefully inadequate. We soon knew that we were in for quite an adventure.

Ryan's opening act was to kick his kindergarten teacher. He stole things from classmates and perfected those skills later in the form of shoplifting.

He was and is a caring big brother, however, and he willingly shared his newfound talents with his brother. Between the two of them we eventually qualified for reserved parking at the

courthouse, and we had their social workers on speed dial. It was a weird time in our lives.

Eventually the phrase "attachment disorder" became part of our lives. In the first 60 seconds of attachment therapy, the therapist asked Ryan, "How would you describe your life?"

"It sucks," he said.

Her immediate rejoinder was, "So who's in control of your life?"

And he proudly blurted out "I am."

"Let's see, your life sucks, and you're in charge. Let's talk about that."

He was toast.

They are both doing quite a bit better today, and we are able to chuckle about some of it now. But the important thing to recognize is that the building blocks for these kids are imperfect, and so they will challenge us—all of us— to continue to try to make a positive difference in their lives.

When Ryan and Daniel were 15 and 13, we were surprised with a newborn who came into our lives a few years back as a newborn.

I danced with her that first night to some Kenny Loggin's music, and she gave me that faint, newborn, closed-eye smile. She set the hook very quickly. Nearly three years later she became our daughter.

