



Inclusive Foster Care at VACFSS

At VACFSS we seek to return every child in care to their parents, family, community and culture. An important foster parent role is to support the connections on which that return is built. If you decide to apply to foster for VACFSS there are many people who will help you foster in an Inclusive way. As a start, please read this

Message from a Foster Caregiver:

I have been fostering for about ten years now...I have worked diligently with the [children's] Nation to establish a co-parenting or inclusive relationship with the children's birth parents and to establish a relationship with the extended families. In...trying to decide which of the many things that I have learned through this process would be most helpful to others I have chosen to write about what I believe are the fundamental things that **I have had to change about myself**. I have had to learn to open my heart and my mind more than I would have thought possible, to put aside all of the judgements that I have had and to most importantly **work with the well part of the family** (myself included). With these few principles as a foundation we have been able to bridge the differences and difficulties that have arisen over the past three years and together provide a healthy environment for these children to grow up in where they feel loved by all, where their loyalties are not torn and where they can accept the realities of their situation and move forward in their lives without the added burdens that sometimes arise from "good intentioned" but mistaken ideas of providing what is truly in their best interests.

When I began to foster I had a notion that I was somehow a better parent than these children's birth parents. I hid my judgements behind many good intentions and behaviour that I believed was "right" or "best". Thank goodness I learned better. I now believe that I have been given the privilege of looking after these children for parents who for whatever reasons are unable to do so. I have found that the love between the parents and the children, despite the many issues that there may be is often all that they have that is good in their relationships and that love deserves to be nurtured in whatever way possible. Once my heart and my mind were open to this different way of thinking it became very important to me to find ways to help all of us be a family together. Once committed to finding ways to bridge the differences and difficulties, the answers and ideas came. In this way we have redefined our family. Our family now includes the birth parents. I would like to say that it came easily; however it hasn't been easy at all.

I have always included the parent(s) in on any important events in the children's lives, be it doctor's appointments, school meetings, concerts, birthday parties, holidays, etc. I imagine that many foster parents do that as well. There have been times when I thought that the parents "should" take a more active role in the children's lives and not surprisingly whatever I thought they "should" do wasn't really relevant at all. I had to put aside the expectations that I had, address what issues I felt were important in an honest and direct manner and move on. I have found that trust has developed between the children's parents and me because of the inclusiveness, the trust built from honest, direct and nonjudgmental communication and as a result the children feel free to express



themselves, their love for their parents, their feelings of loyalty to both their parents and myself without feeling that somehow they "should" be behaving differently... I had to work really hard at letting go of my "martyr" stand that I was taking and forget about the "after all I've done for you's" that were running through my mind and look at this woman, their mother with compassion, find an honest way to tell her how her behaviour affects her children, how it affects me and **listen to her feelings** and to **what she wants for our future relationship as a family**.

We have been able to begin to rebuild our relationship and throughout all of this we have been able to model for the children how to resolve difficulties in a family, put judgments aside, not involve the children in our difficulties and to keep our common goal of providing the best possible upbringing for these children in the forefront of all our decisions. Though we have the children as the focus of our relationship, I have found that a mutual care for each other has developed because we have been able to work through so many problems with each other together. Though at this time some rebuilding of trust has to be established again our relationship continues to grow because of these things.

I sincerely feel I am a much better person for having worked through these problems. I don't always like the things that their mother does, nor the decisions that she makes and I know that the feeling is mutual! I also know that the children are much better off having a relationship with both of their birth parents, again it's not always what I think it "should" be. The important thing is that it is and will continue to be an important part of their lives and it is my responsibility, because I have agreed to **help** raise these children, to make the very best of all the relationships in the children's lives.

We, as foster parents are here to help these parents raise their children. If what we wanted were children to take possession or ownership of, there are other options available to us. Our **job**, however difficult it may be is to help and nurture these families, to work with the well part of the family and build on the strengths that are there. It is easy to focus on what we might not like but it is our responsibility to look after these children, which includes their relationships with their birth families the very best that we can. To constantly look for new ways to nurture the love that is there beneath all of the problems that may have led to the children being in care...

It is my hope that all of us who care for children other than our own are able to look beyond what may be familiar to us and find new ways of opening up one another and redefining "family" for the benefit of these wonderful children whose care we have been entrusted with.

All my Relations,
Debbie Hartlen

Excerpted from *Towards Inclusive Foster Care: A policy handbook* (VACFSS, 2003).