

Five Myths about Foster Care

“Parenting is the only way to help” and other misconceptions.

JERRY T. HAAG

What comes to mind when you think of *foster care*? Maybe you picture a book or movie about a child struggling to stay out of trouble, or you call to mind a story of abuse or neglect so harrowing it becomes an evening news headline. Perhaps you think of a family in your community who seem to have a revolving door in their home where children come and go. These stories paint an incomplete picture of foster care—one without the true narrative of God’s work in the midst of sorrow. Loss and hope. No one will deny the challenges of working within an imperfect system, but when we look deeper, we find a litany of beautiful truths that call us to reflect Jesus’ love for the vulnerable by caring for children who are made in God’s image that need love, safety and support.

A great way to have a better understanding of foster care is to begin with a recognition of five myths that frequently cloud our perception.

Myth 1: Foster care is too hard.

Foster care is challenging, just like any other human relationship—maintaining a healthy marriage, raising children, and holding down a job while dealing with difficult coworkers. But Jesus does not call us to the wide, well-traveled road. He calls us to pursue a life of obedience and rely on God’s strength when we are weak. His yoke is easy and His burden is light not because He keeps us from hard things, but because He supplies our every need in Christ Jesus when we endure difficulty. Challenges can bring about tremendous growth, and the promise of a life in Christ is that we never bear our burdens alone.

Foster care offers the opportunity to position the Gospel front and center, through our actions and words to parents who are hurting, children who are in need of hope, case managers who are overloaded, and a child welfare system that needs help and grace. In the movie *A League of Their Own*, Tom Hanks’ character tells one of his players who wants to quit, “If it were easy, everybody would do it. Hard is what makes it great.” Foster care is great!

Myth 2: Children are put into foster care because of something they did.

When we speak about “how broken the system is”, they tend to forget that the entire point of foster care is to care for children—children who are experiencing deep trauma because of other people’s choices. Many children who enter foster care have been abused, abandoned, or neglected. Oftentimes, due to the trauma they have experienced, they struggle to understand and accept pure, unconditional love. As Christians, we have a remarkable opportunity to reflect the love of Christ to children whose hearts long to be comforted. A warm bed, food security, a positive learning environment, a caring guardian, and gentle voices and hands cannot undo all of the suffering that children in foster care have experienced, but they can all serve as acts of healing.

How we speak about foster care matters a great deal. Our language is a starting point for centering the dignity of everyone involved. “Foster kids” is a label that carries far too many undeserving, unfortunate, and damaging stereotypes, including the long-held and incorrect notion that a child’s behavior can be the catalyst that causes them to enter the foster care system. We can shift thinking by using terms like “children in foster care” instead.

We can also affect change in the perception of foster care by being more intentional about how we discuss biological parents. Many times, the parents of children in foster care are caught up in generational cycles of broken relationships, poverty, and trauma. Without strong support systems, compounded stress can lead to neglectful and abusive behaviors. Ideally, foster parents have the opportunity to walk alongside biological families to lend the well-rooted community and affirming extended family that is missing from their lives.

Myth #3: Empty-nesters are too old to be involved.

“You are never too old to set a new goal or dream a new dream.” The Bible describes wisdom as being more precious than gold, and empty-nesters can find encouragement in the stories of Sarah, Naomi, and Anna—people whose lives reflected purpose and passion in their later years.

Through this lens, it is easy to see that empty-nesters are uniquely equipped to be foster parents, especially to teens. Such parents have learned through experience, already having raised their own children to adulthood, and they also may have financial flexibility that younger people do not.

Even if older people cannot commit to foster parenting, the adventure of foster care is best lived out in the midst of communal fellowship. Foster parents thrive when the local church and neighborhood leaders play dynamic support roles through providing encouragement, prayer, and resources. Empty-nesters make great babysitters and respite care providers when foster parents need a break. They can serve as de facto “aunts and uncles” or “grandparents” to children who desperately need positive role models and familial relationships. They can offer a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, and a pat on the back when children in foster care *and* foster parents need love and support.

Myth #4: You have to be married to foster.

Some of the most incredible foster parents are single parents. Empathy, compassion, patience, flexibility, and forgiveness are certainly not qualities limited to those with spouses. Single foster parents often have a special appreciation for the value of camaraderie, friendship, and unconditional love, which translates well to caring for children from lonely or difficult situations.

A circle of support can take many forms—a marriage, absolutely, but also a friend group, a church family, and community involvement. Marriage is not a prerequisite for fostering, and churches have a great opportunity to come alongside single people within their congregations to foster by committing to support them along the way.

Myth #5: The only way to engage in foster care is by becoming a foster parent.

At any given time over the last decade, there have been over 400,000 children in care in the United States of America. The time and energy it takes to care for that many people could not be shouldered by foster parents alone—nor should it be. Every person has skills, abilities, and resources that can play a crucial role in meeting the needs of vulnerable children in their communities. For some, that means saying “yes” to the call of becoming foster parents. For others, it means wrapping around foster families with love, prayers, and resources.

At [One More Child](#), we created the [Foster Crew model of engagement](#), which empowers church families to make a lasting impact on foster families in their church and their community in simple and effective ways. If you can mow lawns, do laundry, cook meals, or send notes of encouragement, then you can make a vital difference in the lives of families and children in foster care.

What do you enjoy doing? What does your schedule look like in this season? The answers to these questions can help you begin to identify ways you might support the foster care community around you. Call upon the Holy Spirit to provide the guidance and wisdom that every one of us needs to walk into difficult challenges and see God change the trajectories of lives and eternities.

Whether through a monthly grocery delivery, a weekly babysitting session, or a daily commitment as a foster parent, caring for children in foster care is a mission the Church must own and prioritize to see families restored and communities strengthened. Ask God what you can do to help.

Foster care is not just about some of us opening our homes to meet the needs of hurting children. It is about all of us living out the mission of the Church by making sure that every vulnerable child, displaced biological parent and loving foster family know there is support and hope during even the darkest times. Then, we can all prepare to witness and experience incredible stories of redemption!

Dr. Jerry Haag is the president/CEO of One More Child. During his tenure as president, he has guided the expansion of ministry sites from nine locations in Florida to more than 50 locations around the globe. Dr. Haag brings extensive leadership to public policy platforms through his work at the White House in Washington D.C, through his appointment as the chairman of the Florida Governor’s Faith-Based Advisory Council, and through close partnerships with top leaders around the world. Dr. Haag and his wife, Christi, live in Lakeland, FL, and are proud parents to their sons Ben and Brady.

© 2022 Christianity Today - a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.