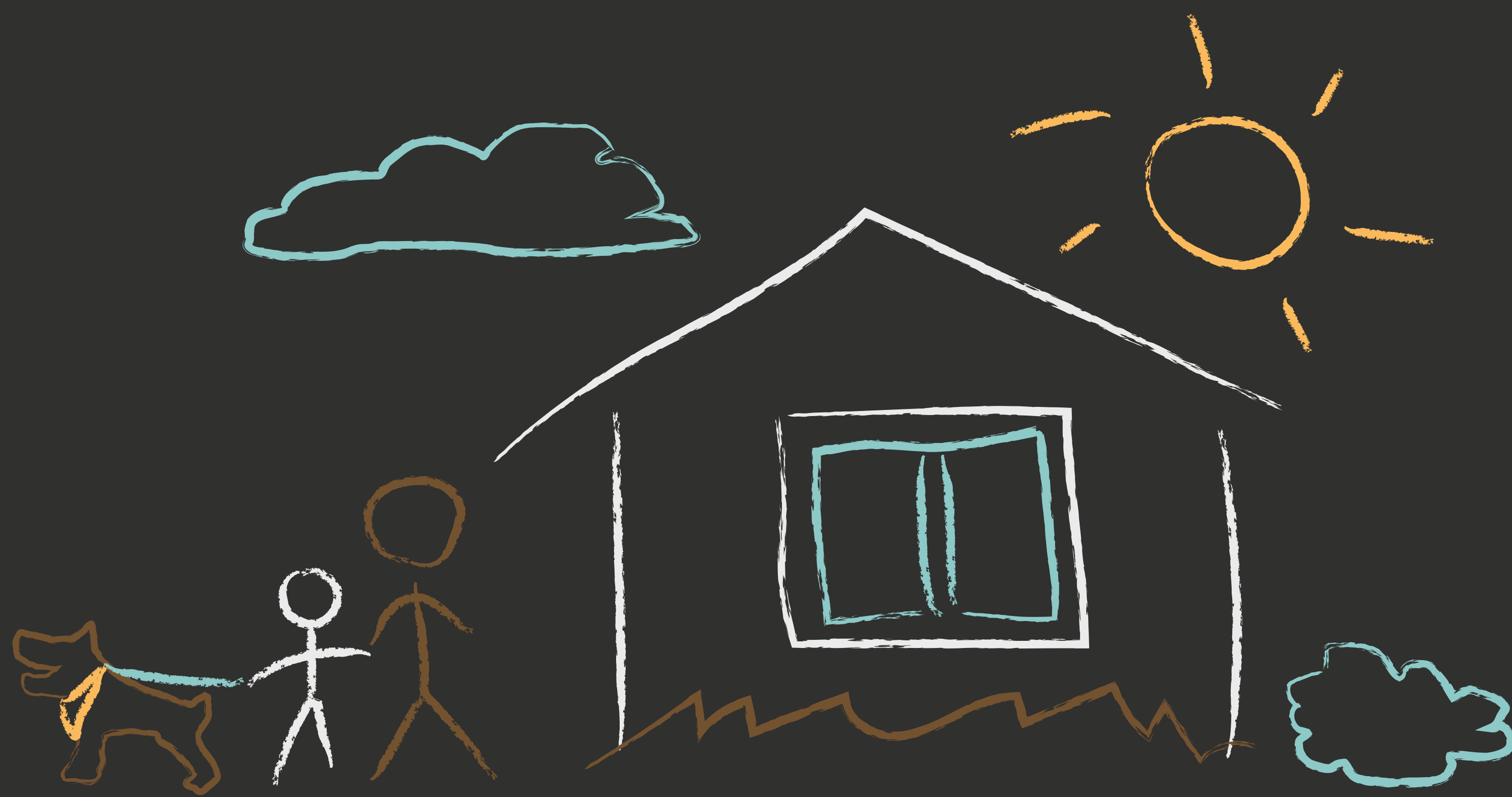


SOME THINGS *I've learned*



Guidance and tips for future and current foster & adoptive parents, from the perspective of a single foster & adoptive dad.

Peter Mutabazi

A letter from Peter:



Hello,

I'm so happy you're here and reading these words. Whether you're a seasoned foster parent or simply curious about the foster and adoption processes, I hope you'll find some helpful information in this ebook. Before I became a foster parent, I had this deep feeling of wanting to give back. When I started learning about the US foster care system, I was shocked to learn just how many kids are forgotten and cast aside. I knew how it felt to feel unseen and I wanted to do what I could to give to these kids the experience of being seen and known. However, like any new parent, I had a lot of fears and hesitations.

In the process of fostering, I came to realize a lot of things; including how much I'm not who I thought I was, and how much I still have to learn. In many ways, my kids have taught me more than I could ever teach them. It has truly been an experience like no other. I put together this ebook in the hopes it can be used as a starting point. No matter what stage of the process you're in, I want you to know that you aren't ever alone. There are growing numbers of resources and people who have been exactly where you are. Let's do this together.

With gratitude,

Peter Mutabazi

PART 1

Some Background

*Do what you can, with what you have,
where you are.*

– Theodore Roosevelt

*Be willing to be a beginner every single
morning.*

– Meister Eckhart

*It's not what happens to you, but how you
react that matters.*

– Epictetus

My Story

HOW I BECAME A FOSTER PARENT

I'm originally from Uganda. When I was a child, I experienced living in poverty, and since my family was unable to provide for me, I ran away and lived on the streets for five years. One day I met a stranger who saw me according to my potential, and not for the circumstances I was living in. He gave me the option to go with him and attend school rather than continue living on the streets. No one had ever seen that kind of potential in me before, and it was such a powerful experience that I decided to go with him. My adoptive family cared for me, gave me a family to belong to, and provided me with resources to change my life. They renewed a hope in me that I thought I'd lost. When I arrived in the US and saw the amount of wealth here, I couldn't stop thinking about the phrase, "To whom much is given, much is required". I felt I had been given so much, and I wanted to give back. After witnessing the staggering need for foster and adoptive parents, I knew I wanted those kids to have the same experience of being seen and known that I had been given all those years ago.

My Biggest Fear

BEFORE BECOMING A FOSTER PARENT

My biggest fears before becoming a foster parent revolved around my past and my background. I didn't have a good dad, and I was afraid I would end up repeating his behaviors. I was also afraid of being misunderstood since I came from a different culture. I wasn't sure whether the kids would enjoy being around me. I had never been a parent, so I was concerned I wouldn't know how to assert authority and create boundaries. I had my values and principles, but I didn't know how I was going to encourage those in kids who came from such different backgrounds than me. But when I really thought about it, I realized that I had so many ways to learn and to solve problems. I had friends with kids, and I knew I could start by applying what little I knew to the process, and then learn the rest as I went. I knew I had people to call if something went wrong. I tried to believe in myself and project confidence, but deep down I wasn't so sure I could do it. I had heard really bad stories about kids reporting parents, intentionally causing chaos, and all the rest of the cautionary foster kid stories. Most of it had to do with being a single parent, like who would be my witness if someone said something that wasn't true? What if something happened to me?

Surprise!

WHAT I WISH I WOULD HAVE KNOWN

When I started the process, I was shocked to find out I was the only male applying in my state. I also anticipated that any child I got would come from a racial minority, because in my mind I didn't think white kids had the same issues. So I was pretty shocked when my first child was white, and then I quickly realized that systemic problems like poverty and abuse truly do affect kids from every racial background. Even kids from wealthy families can end up in the system due to abuse and neglect. It's a wide ranging problem.

DID YOU KNOW: 44% of foster children are White, 23% African American, 21% Hispanic. Additionally, about 118,000 children and youth in America are waiting to be adopted.



PART 2

Fostering 101

Nothing happens unless first we dream.

– Carl Sandburg

Every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story.

– Josh Shipp



Fostering vs. Adoption

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE?

I liken the experience of being a foster parent to trying to parent with your hands tied behind your back. The child belongs to the state, so everything you do for their wellbeing requires documented permission. They also check in once or twice a month, with you and with the child individually, and they also come to the house every month to check on the living conditions and how things are going. Reporting on your own parenting skills is a little scary. A child can say whatever they want, and it can be difficult to parent confidently when you feel scrutinized. When you adopt, a lot of those pressures change or go away entirely. Not only do the kids get to have your last name and really become part of your life, but they finally get the chance to breathe and live a more “normal” life. They don’t have to interact with a social worker, which can be a big positive for some kids who view social workers as just the bearers of bad news. When you become that child’s legal parent, your kids know that you have their back and can make final decisions, which provides them with a different sense of safety. You can give them the assurance that they’re there to stay. You no longer have to report to the state and you generally have a lot more control. It really is a huge relief.

Getting the facts

HOW TO GET THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

Oftentimes foster agencies are so in need of foster parents and so excited to get you signed up, they won't spend as much time educating you and answering your questions as you might expect. I did a lot of my own research online so that by the time I contacted the agencies, I had a pretty solid list of questions and concerns to ask them about. Other foster parents provided me with a lot of resources when I was in the information gathering stage. They helped educate me on what to expect and also eased some of the fears I had going in.

DID YOU KNOW:

Although foster care regulations vary from state to state, there are some universal requirements:

- Age 21 or older
- Criminal background check
- Family stability
- Character references
- Regular source of income
- Home safety inspection
- Family home assessment



Budgeting

CAN I AFFORD TO FOSTER?

When you sign up to foster, the agency verifies your insurance as well as a consistent source of income separate from the money they give you for the child's needs. You don't really need a specific budget, because a lot of their needs are already provided for. The child is already medically insured, daycare is provided, and the kids get free lunch at school. Kids are typically bused to school, and social workers can also help with transportation to medical appointments and meetings with parents. You are responsible for providing what the child needs when they're living in your home, but the child's needs outside of the home are pretty well provided for. The stipend you are given covers small expenses like clothing and gas for transportation. Other costs you incur by choice, such as my decision to send my kids to private school. All things considered, money really wasn't a barrier.

Space

HOW MUCH DO I NEED?

The real thing to consider in regards to space is how many children you would like to foster. This will depend on how many extra bedrooms you have. Each state has different rules, but usually you can have young siblings ages 0-8 in the same room. For older kids with an age gap or a gender difference, the state prefers separate bedrooms for the child's privacy and protection.

Placements

HOW SPECIFIC CAN I BE?

You can request age, gender, and race of child. In some states, you will be licensed according to the category of child you ask for. For this reason, it's better to give an age range rather than a specific number. The more specific your requirements, the longer it will take to place a child with you. Different homes are appropriate for different kids. For example, in my case, I can only take girls if they have a brother, and if they're below age 8.

Schooling

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Kids are assigned to homes according to location, and the state will try to assign kids who are already located in the same area as you. They make an effort to keep the children in the same school to provide as much continuity and stability as possible, which is so important especially when so many things about their lives are in a state of constant change. If the kids are coming from far away, they will have to re enroll in a school near you.

Regarding transportation, the state will always find a way to make sure the pickup schedule doesn't conflict with your work schedule. Daycares will provide care for kids up to age 15 as well as provide transportation to school. Most daycares allow you to pick up your child as late as 6, and they stay open on days the kids don't have school. Schools also help with transitions by allowing you to drop kids off early and pick them up later. In my experience, there is always a way to figure out the logistics.

“ Should I go through the government agency (DSS) or should I go to a private agency that acts as the go-between? ”

When you work with a government agency to foster, they will place kids from their county with you, but some people prefer not to have an agency act as the intermediary. If you do use a private agency, the government will call the private agency to see if they have a family available. You will only hear from the private agency, and the private agency will be responsible for training you. If you choose to work with DSS, they deal with you directly and you change social workers every time you get a child. I use a private agency, so when I get a child, my one social worker always places kids with me. I also have the benefit of being represented by that private agency. I get two phone calls a month from two different people, the social worker from the agency I work with, and the social worker from DSS who represents my child. It surprised me to see how many people are involved in the process. You have a lot of people calling you. For me, it was helpful to have a consistent social worker act as a reliable go between, especially as a single father.

PART 3

It Takes a Village

The power of community to create health is far greater than any physician, clinic or hospital.

– Mark Hyman

One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing.

– Jean Vanier

Community

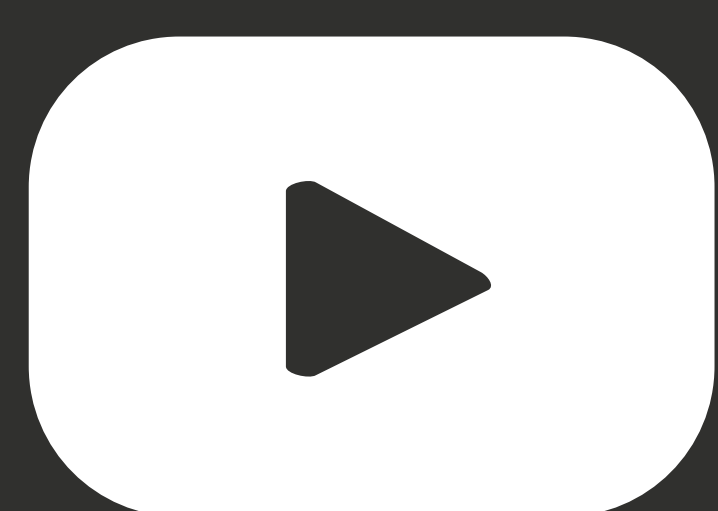
WHAT CHANGES TO EXPECT

When you foster or adopt, your community changes in a lot of ways. When building community, I knew I had to be strategic. I wanted to foster kids between the ages of 2 and 10, so I needed friends with kids in that age bracket. I also knew some of my single friends could help me out. I just had to be honest and transparent with my friends and ask if they were truly willing to help me if I needed it. I told them all about the process, the rules around the children's privacy, appropriate boundaries, and that their support meant the world to me. I also knew that unfortunately there are some people out there who have negative opinions about foster kids. I had to stop being friends with those people. I did lose friends who didn't support the process, or who only saw the negative aspects of having foster kids. Some of them also looked at race in an unhealthy way.

All kids come with trauma, and the outside world judges them really harshly for behavioral issues. I was adapting to the lives of my kids, and I needed friends who were willing to adapt with me. I have to be aware

of the things my kids are afraid of, like water or dogs, and avoid social events that might trigger those fears. It's no longer about you, so you may have to give up or adjust certain freedoms you once had.

Everyone needs a support team of some kind, even if they don't have kids of their own. However, it's particularly helpful to have friends who are also fostering, because you have a unique understanding of each others needs. If I need to go out of town, it's a lot easier for me to leave my kids with another foster parent. I'm in North Carolina, and I have these friends in Texas who I call for both medical and parenting advice. If I have to travel, the state or agency provides respites, which are other foster families who are licensed and can take in your child while you're gone. This weekend, I'm hosting kids whose foster parents are traveling. Whether it's family, friends, or social workers, there is always someone to help you and it's good to have friends or family who are willing to support you when you need it. It really does take a village, and everyone's village is going to look a little different.



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Friends

HOW TO LET FRIENDS GET INVOLVED

You need to keep in mind that your home should be the number one safe place for your kids. When making introductions, I find that it's best to bring friends over to your house to get to know your kids in the context of their safe place. Different friends can help you out in different ways, so in a sense you have to match your friends interests to your kids interests. Some friends primarily help through encouragement, while others can be involved in a more direct way. You also can't share too much about your kids' lives with your friends. American culture places a lot of emphasis on individual achievement, and it's easy sometimes to think you can do it all without help, but it's a whole lot easier in the long run to be transparent with your friends about your needs. A lot of people want to help, but they don't know how. Meals are such an easy and tangible way to let your friends help. Things like bringing over a pizza or giving gift cards to the kids are also really helpful. My kids love to swim but I don't have a swimming pool, so it's a real treat for them when my friends let them come over and swim. I have found it's a good idea to have at least two other people you trust who can pick up your kids if needed, whether it's to go out for ice cream or to help with transport from school.

Going Out

HOW TO HANDLE THINGS IN PUBLIC

Every time I have my kids in public, I always have an exit strategy pre-planned in case something goes wrong. When it does, react as if no one saw what just happened and try to make an exit as quickly as you can. Always put whatever else is happening to the side in order to deal with what's happening with the child. If we're going shopping and something happens, I'll just put what I was gonna buy on the ground and leave. It's best to do everything possible to avoid embarrassing them. There is always a reason behind a child's behavior. They all have trauma and act out in different ways. You can't place people's comfort above the needs of your kid. You can apologize, but ultimately it's not useful to worry too much about what other people think. The most important thing is finding a way to de-escalate the situation quickly. Rather than getting into an argument, ask your child if it's okay if you both go outside or go to the bathroom to talk about what's going on. The more you get to know your child,

the more you'll get to know the things that trigger them. There are always signs before the child has a meltdown, and it shows up in their body language or by way of other hints. When I travel, I always have the iPads or games on my phone that I can use as a distraction. One kid I had would go straight to the candy section of the store and just put the candy in his mouth, because he knew if it was in his mouth it couldn't be returned. So before we left to go to the store, I'd tell him we were going shopping and make sure to give him a few dollars for candy so he knew he'd get it. In my experience, the more the child knows they have the option and the freedom, the less inclined they are to steal or try and get things in an unsafe or disruptive way. Kids also like routine more than surprises, so it's good to prepare them ahead of time for what they can expect.

Pro Tip

When going out, always have an escape plan!



PART 4

Tips For Success

Never underestimate how much you can love someone and how it can change their life. Never forget that the hardest ones to love are the ones that need it most.

– Unknown

Sometimes our work as caregivers is not for the faint of heart. But, you will never know what you are made of until you step into the fire. Step bravely!

– Deborah A. Beasley

Trauma Responses

HELPING CHILDREN FEEL SAFE

It's incredibly important to be aware and acknowledge when a child isn't feeling safe. Once you make it clear that their feelings are valid, visible, and important to you, you can help them figure out what would make them feel safe. This means paying attention to the things they love and making sure they always have access to those things, such as comfort objects. Some kids are afraid to sleep alone, so you can address that by leaving the lights on, making sure they know you're close, and giving them permission to come and wake you if they need to. The important part is to acknowledge their fears and make sure they know that you understand. Sometimes they're too little to tell you what they feel, and that's an opportunity for you to help them figure it out. If there's anything you know of that frightens them, make sure it stays out of sight or put away. I have a dog and I always keep the dog crated until I'm totally sure that the child is comfortable. Over time, you'll learn what's okay and safe from the child's point of view, and also how best to help them get over their fears. To give an example, I have a four year old who doesn't like sleeping alone and prefers to sleep with his brother. I compromise with him by letting him fall asleep with his brother before moving him to his own bed. I think it's important for kids to know what to expect in their environments. I try to be as honest as I can with my kids and not make promises I'm not sure I can keep.

What is the most outrageous thing one of your kids has ever said to you?



One kid had been with me for one week and he was really missing his mom. One day he looked at me and said “Peter, I have a solution. You can marry my mom, she can move in, and then I can live with both of you.” I asked him “Do you think your mom would want to marry me?” And confidently he said “Yep. Give me your phone. I’ll tell her right now. I know she’ll marry you.” I thought it was adorable. It’s funny the things kids will say or do just to have their parents back. But he didn’t just say he wanted to go back to his mom, but that he wanted to be with both of us. It was so cute.

Overwhelmed?

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE STRESSED

Parenting is stressful no matter what. I get overwhelmed often, and when that happens, I know I need to walk away. If one of my kids throws a fit and starts calling me names, I will find a way to excuse myself. Sometimes they just want to argue and there's no point in trying to reason with them. In that instance I'll say, "Hey, with how I'm feeling right now, I can't give you an answer. I'm going to take five minutes to myself to think about things and then come back. How does that sound?" I make sure to do that for myself when I get overwhelmed. I also remind myself that it's not my fault when things get bad like. There's always a reason, and it's usually not me. It's also good to have someone you trust to go to when you're feeling overwhelmed. Not family, because they have a natural inclination to protect you and you don't want the kids to become the enemy in their eyes. I find it helpful to talk to another foster family because they usually already understand how you're feeling and can approach the situation without bias. Without the emotional component, they can think straight and give you advice that's beneficial for both you and your kids. Running is also my way of thinking and self regulation. I use it as a way of de-stressing and calming myself down so I can think more clearly. You can be honest with your kids about things like that. I give them timeouts all the time, so it makes sense to them that I would need one too.

Setting Expectations

KNOW YOUR BOUNDARIES

Know your boundaries: I think it's good to have some expectations, especially around what I'm prepared to do. It's helpful to ask yourself what you are prepared to learn. I came in expecting to learn a lot about myself. In some ways, I came in expecting the worst, and was pleasantly surprised when the reality wasn't as bad as my imagination. It's helpful to spend some time thinking about what you're going to do in times of frustration. If you set high expectations, you increase the likelihood that you'll end up feeling like a failure, but it's amazing what can happen when you come with an openness and willingness to learn. There is also the conversation around what expectations you have for your kids. We don't use crude language in our home, so that's an example of an expectation I have for kids who come to stay with me. I don't judge them when they don't meet it, but I'll always remind them. We also go to church, because that's what I do in my home. I don't ask them to understand it fully or to agree with my beliefs, but it's a standard I've set for my household. I also expect them to go to school, to finish their homework before playing video games, and to know that games are a privilege they will lose if they aren't doing well in school. I find that when it comes to

rules, I have to keep setting and re-setting them. My kids know that school comes first, but it's my job to help them understand why. I think it's also important not to get discouraged when they don't meet my expectations. After three years, I'm still reminding my 14 year old to make his bed and organize his clothes. We are always defining and redefining rules and roles so that everyone knows who is expected to do what. Those roles help set age-appropriate expectations. The whole time I remind myself that they are individuals and that my standards are different from theirs, so I try to place the emphasis on meeting each other halfway.



SEE MORE

Watch Peter share more about this and more on the **Now I Am Known** YouTube Channel

When to Step In

RESPECTING THEIR PRIVACY WHILE SETTING BOUNDARIES

Knowing when to intervene can be tricky, but each child's unique needs and behavioral patterns will become clear to you in time. Some kids really just want all the attention you can give them. My kids attend separate schools, so they finish at different times in the day. This gives me an opportunity to spend with each of them one on one. I want to make sure each kid feels like they have all of my attention at least once a day. I have two teenagers, so we have to talk about sex and relationships. They are both at the stage where it's appropriate to discuss certain things, so we talk about it all together. But with how frequently they are changing and growing and learning, the time and attention they need is also in a state of constant change. If I can see that one kid is struggling, I will adjust things in our lives so that I can attend to them alone.

PART 5

You Got This!

You may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing that we call 'failure' is not the falling down, but the staying down.

– Mary Pickford

The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson



Personal Growth

SOME THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT MYSELF

In the process of fostering, you come to realize who you're not; or how much you're not who you thought you were. I came from my own history of abuse, so having foster kids really triggered a lot of things in me that I thought I had already dealt with. Kids are very perceptive, and they know exactly how to push your buttons. I realized quickly that I needed to deal with my past, so I decided to go to counseling. In the preparation classes, the social workers talk all about the kids' trauma, and that made me think a lot about mine. Despite being painful, that process helped me learn so much. In some ways, it feels like the whole thing has helped me more than it helps the kids. It clarifies what's truly important. For example, I like my house clean and organized, but as it turns out kids don't usually care about that unless they're taught to. In order to love my kids well, I had to learn to put them aside some of those preferences and habits. I had to learn what it really means to love someone unconditionally, starting with me. I had to accept my past, learn how it had affected me, and find ways to move forward. I always considered myself an

emotional guy, but my kids have taught me to be even more vulnerable and honest about how I feel. I had internalized a certain idea of masculinity, which came with a lot of pride. Being a foster dad revealed my real character, and all my anger, passion, vengefulness, and more. When your patience is tested, everything about you comes to the surface and you then have to decide what you're going to do about it. A kid will call you every bad thing in the book and then turn around and ask what's for dinner as if nothing happened.. You have to learn how to set aside those difficult feelings so that you can love well.



SEE MORE →

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So, what is Success?

HOW TO KNOW YOU'RE NOT TOTALLY BOMBING IT

To me, it's a success that the kids haven't run away and you haven't had to call the police. But truly I think the success lies in the fact that every day you learn something about your kid and something about you. It's easy to focus on the problems because there's a lot of them, but when you both learn things - they teach you as much as you teach them. Success is loving a kid no matter what trauma has done to them or the behaviors they come with, without passing judgement. I think success is understanding how to do that. I think it's easy to pick and choose the parts you love, but you can't really do that. You need to truly and unconditionally love that child despite everything that's happened to them and despite what they might do. Even if you never see the results, if you can have empathy, that's success.

”

I think I want to foster, but I'm just not ready yet. What are some steps I can take right now to set myself up to do so in a few years?

Once I decided I wanted to be a foster dad, I started looking for houses with extra bedrooms. By the time I approached the agency, I had already moved out of my one bedroom apartment and into a three bedroom house. There are foundational lifestyle decisions you can make years before you start fostering that will prepare you to begin. I knew I'd be beginning the process as a single dad, so I knew I couldn't take a full time 9-5 job. I changed my career to real estate so that I'd have more flexibility. I'm not saying you'll have to leave your job, but it's helpful to start making the proper adjustments way ahead of time so you'll be well prepared for the long term.

Next Steps

LET'S GET STARTED!

Do you want to get involved, but you're not sure how to? There are plenty of online resources and local agencies in your area ready to help guide you in your journey. A quick google search will give you some great local resources.

For more information, a great place to start is the national Child Welfare Information Gateway:

www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad

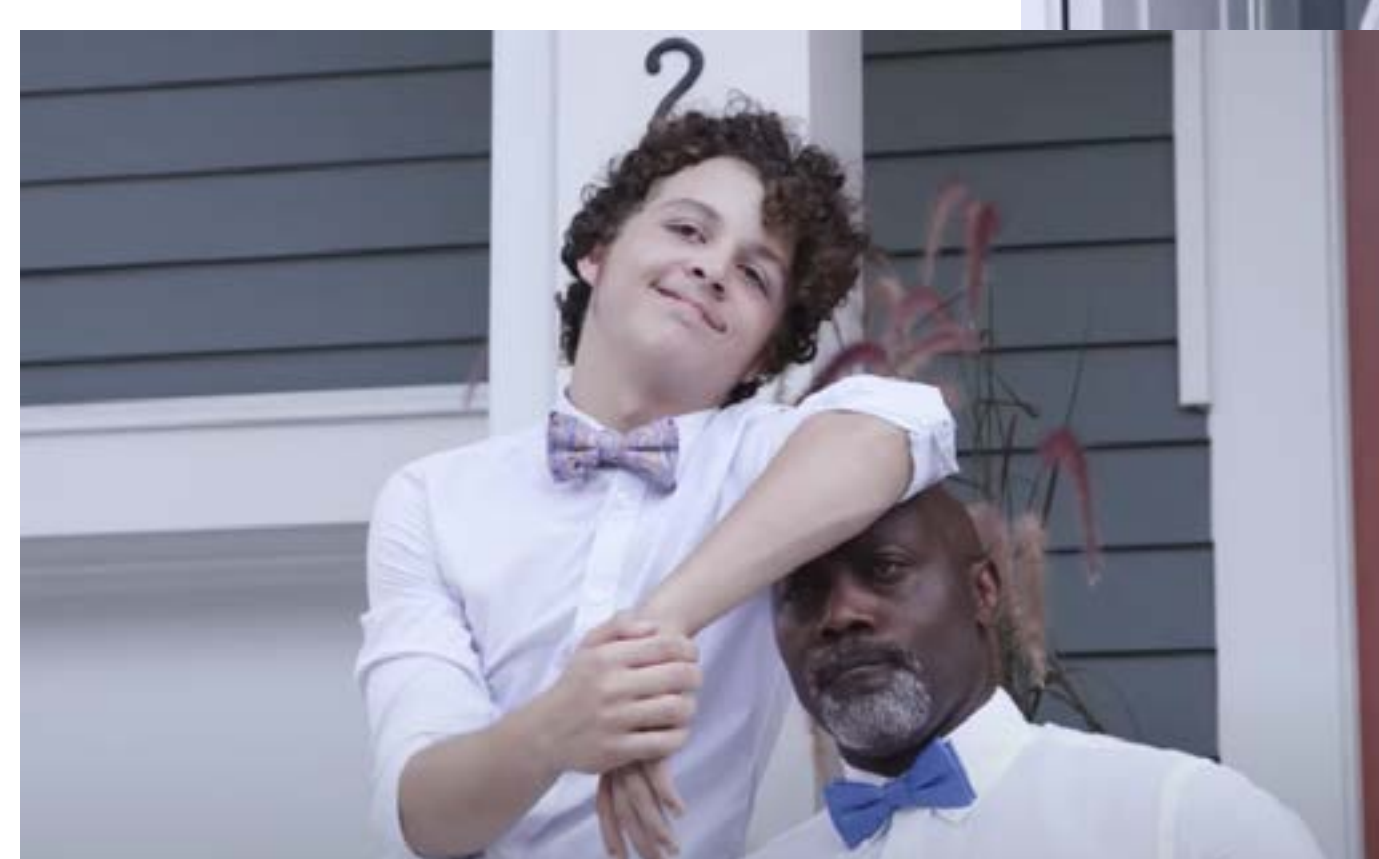
What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?

- Vincent van Gogh



MEET

Peter and Anthony



Now I am Known

HELP A FOSTER CHILD TODAY!

Even with everything I've learned as a foster and adoptive parent, I still sometimes find myself at a loss for how to help my kids when they were processing their trauma. A major breakthrough for me came when I got a dog, Simba, who was able to provide them with another level of comfort that I simply couldn't on my own.

That's why we've designed a unique stuffed plushie dog in Simba's likeness to comfort foster children with foundational, identity-forming messages of hope.

For every plushie you purchase, one is given to a child in need, or you can choose to donate 2!

Follow the link below to brighten a child's life today!



Buy the Simba Plushie

THANKS

for taking the time to educate yourself and make a difference in childrens' lives. Stay in touch with us on our social channels so we can make a difference together!

— Simba



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