



Safe HARBOR

A CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE
TO FOSTER CARE

HOPE_{for}
ORPHANS

SAFE HARBOR: A CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE TO FOSTER CARE

Hope for Orphans®

5800 Ranch Drive

Little Rock, AR 72223

1.800.358.6329

www.HopeForOrphans.org

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THE BIG PICTURE

WHY DO WE HAVE FOSTER CARE?

The simple answer is that we have foster care because we live in a fallen world. Because of sin, sometimes moms and dads do not treat their children as God intended them to, and cross the line into neglect, abuse or even abandonment. Or parents may fall into circumstances that prevent them from properly caring for their children. Foster care is a mechanism by which children may receive proper care while their parents work to correct the problems that led to the abuse or neglect and hopefully allow them to receive their children back into their home. If correcting the problems is not possible, foster care bridges the gap between removal from their home and permanent placement through adoption or legal guardianship.

The Foster Care system often gets a bad rap. We've all seen and heard stories of children lost by the system, of kids abused or even killed while in foster placements, of kids who age out of the system to live lives marked by hopelessness and despair. There are plenty of real and serious problems that make it is easy to blame the government or the individuals involved in the system. But the real problem is that there are not enough people willing to stand up to defend and care for the children who find themselves in these situations. Sadly, for many decades at least, the Church has been largely absent and silent in this arena, and we believe this grieves the heart of God. We also believe God is in the process of calling the Church to respond and we are beginning to see what happens when the Church answers that call all around the nation.

With a scriptural mandate to care for the orphan, who better than the body of Christ to help bring healing and restoration to hurting children and families? As Christians, we need to stop complaining about or turning a blind eye to the ills of the foster care system, and instead start to take responsibility to utilize our unique position and calling to respond to the foster care crisis.

This guide to foster care is designed to help Christians thoughtfully consider what it means to parent children in foster care from a Biblical perspective. Just as we need to parent our own children in a manner consistent with what God tells us, we need to do the same with the children in foster care in our communities. It is our hope and prayer that this resource will help you gain a clearer picture of God's plan for His Church to be a light in the dark places that these children are experiencing.

GOD'S HEART

Part of knowing God means learning what He likes and dislikes, what pleases Him and what angers Him. In other words, if you want to truly know God, you need to find out what matters to Him. It is abundantly clear from Scripture that orphans are close to God's heart, and that He wants His followers to care for them.

The Bible doesn't talk specifically about children in foster care, though it does say a lot about fatherless children, or orphans. For our purposes, we consider children in foster care to be among the fatherless, or orphans, referred to in God's Word. These children may not have lost their parents to death, but they have certainly been deprived of proper parental care and thus, are in need of someone to take them in and care for them. The Bible provides a clear indication of God's heart for the orphaned and the fatherless throughout the history of mankind.

CREATION

God created everything beautiful and perfect. People were created to live with God, our Father, forever. If the world had stayed perfect, there would be no orphans.

God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. - Genesis 1:31a

FALL

People turned away from God (sin), and the world became broken. People could no longer live forever, their relationships were broken, and as a result, many children became orphans.

For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. - Genesis 3:19c

ISRAEL

God loves orphans and other hurting and lonely people so much that He commanded His followers, the people of Israel, to help them.

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. - Deuteronomy 24:19

JESUS

God sent His Son, Jesus, to Earth to rescue people who are lonely and hurting. His death on the cross opened a pathway to forgiveness and adoption into His family.

For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will. - Ephesians 1:4-5

THE CHURCH

God wants His children to help orphans and others who need it until He comes back to make everything perfect again.

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. - Matthew 5:16

RENEWED CREATION

When Jesus comes back, there won't be any more sin, no one will be lonely or hurting, and no more children will become orphans.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' - Revelation 21:3-5a

THE FATHERLESS OF THE BIBLE AND TODAY'S CHILD IN FOSTER CARE

The Bible says a lot about the fatherless. As fathers were the sole providers and protectors in those days, children who lost their fathers were in serious need of protectors and providers. To be a fatherless child was to be left extremely vulnerable. God's Word is full of commands to His people to make provision for the fatherless, to defend them, to seek good for them, to try to pick up the pieces left behind by the absence of a father.



THE PROBLEM

Currently:

- There are over 400,000 children in the U.S. foster care system
- Approximately 250,000 children enter the foster care system each year
- There are over 100,000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted
- Close to 60,000 children are placed in institutions or group homes rather than traditional foster homes each year
- Over 25,000 "age out" of the system each year, with no family structure as a safety net as they enter adulthood
- There are many children placed in shelters or other temporary housing waiting for a foster home
- Many children are placed in group homes or less qualified, overcrowded foster homes because high quality foster homes are not available

And yet:

There are over 350,000 churches in the United States. If the Church were to step up and begin living out God's heart for orphans, in a short time there could be virtually zero waiting children. Those who must be in foster care could all be served in high quality Christian foster homes until permanency is achieved.

THE MANDATE

God is clear on this issue. It is the Church's job to care for the vulnerable among us. As this need continues to exist in our communities, God has called His church to practice pure and undefiled religion (or worship) by looking after orphans and widows (James 1:27). He has given us the task of caring for His children.

Not all are called to adopt or foster, but all are called to love "the least of these." The first question we all must answer is: "Am I available for how God wants to use me in the lives of children in foster care?"

Our prayer for you as you read this guide and continue your research about foster care is that you would hear clearly from God. And, when you hear from Him, that you will follow His leading.

THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

THE PLAYERS

The foster care system can be very complicated, and it varies slightly from state to state. However, the first step to understanding this system is to gain a grasp of the various entities involved. Here is a list of the major players that you may encounter as you become a foster parent.

THE CHILDREN

Generally speaking, children enter foster care because their primary caregivers are not giving them acceptable care as defined by child welfare laws. Child maltreatment can involve neglect, abuse (sexual, physical and/or emotional) or abandonment, or it may be some combination of these factors. Laws and policies vary from state to state; however, the goal is to only remove the children from their homes when it is necessary for the child's safety. In some instances, services are provided to help the family achieve a safer and healthier home, so that removal doesn't need to occur. However, in other cases removal is determined to be necessary for the child's safety and well-being.

BIOLOGICAL FAMILY

Each child will have a home from which they were removed. Most of the time there will be a birth mom, sometimes a birth dad, and there are often siblings and extended family members such as grandparents or aunts and uncles who may have played a significant role in their lives prior to being removed from the home. Most children still love their family despite what they have experienced and will experience intense grief due to the separation from them.

It can be easy to judge biological families as we learn more about the reasons for the child's removal. However as Christians, it is important for us to recognize that personal and societal sin has marked the lives of all parties involved, not just the children. We need to be reminded that our role is not judge and jury and that God may even have a role for us to play in blessing the birth family in some way through our involvement in their children's lives. Sometimes, birth families can be overpowered and mistreated by the system, and there may be a role for us to speak up for them as we pursue justice for all in everything that we do.

THE STATE AGENCY

In each case, there will be an agency that represents the state (or county) in which you live that has been given responsibility to address the needs of abused and neglected children. These agencies go by a variety of names depending on the state, but often have "child welfare", "child and family services", or "child protective services" as a component of their name. The roles that these government agencies play vary greatly across the United States. In some states the state agency will handle virtually all aspects of the foster system, while in other states, the agency contracts out many or most of the services to private, licensed agencies. And, depending on how it is organized you may have frequent contact with this agency, or little to no contact if you are working through a private, contracted agency.

FOSTER PARENTS

The role of foster parents has been evolving over the last few decades. In the past, foster parents were expected to play a fairly passive role in the children's lives, basically as employed caretakers for the state. They were expected to provide basic minimal care (food, shelter, clothing) and were either forbidden or discouraged from having input into the decision-making regarding the child in their home. Thankfully, this is changing for the better.

More and more, government workers are seeking input from foster parents, looking at them more as partners in the children's care, rather than employees fulfilling a duty. The training for foster parents is beginning to reflect this as we see more preparation and education around helping children heal and thrive while in foster care. Legally, foster parents have also been allowed a more active role and more input in children's cases. Additionally, if reunification with the biological family is not possible, one of the more common and desired outcomes is adoption by the foster family.

In most cases, foster parents are allowed, and in some states encouraged, to attend the court hearings regarding the children placed in their homes. When this is possible we recommend attending those hearings. Foster parents can make a tremendous difference in making sure the judge gets the full story, and in making sure the children receive the justice they deserve. In addition you will be far more informed about what is happening in that child's life from a legal standpoint. Moreover, by showing up, you are sending a strong message to everyone involved, including the child, that you care.



SOCIAL WORKERS

Various social workers will be involved in the child's life. Different ones play different roles. There is typically an intake worker and possibly an investigator who is involved in the initial removal of the child. There will be a state-employed caseworker responsible for managing the case until permanency is achieved. There may be a social worker employed by the contracted foster agency that manages the child's case and supports the foster family. There will be supervisors and others involved. These workers are individuals, and as such, they may very well disagree with one another, with you and with others about what is in the child's best interests. Recognize that you have a duty to cooperate with each of your social workers, but you also have a God-given duty to speak up and advocate for that child, if and when you believe the child's best interests are not being served. As you speak up, do so in a manner that honors God and demonstrates that your utmost concern is for the child, rather than any personal desires.

LAWYERS

There may be a number of different attorneys involved in a child's case. The child may be assigned an attorney ad litem whose role is to advocate for the wishes of the child in court. This role is different than a caseworker or a court appointed special advocate (CASA), who try to determine the best interests of the child, which may be different than that child's wishes. The birth parents may also have an attorney to argue for their rights. In addition the state has an attorney, typically from the district attorney's office, who has the burden of proving why the child should be in the custody of the state, rather than the parents' care. There are some cases that you as foster parents may have a need to hire an attorney as well.

THE JUDGE

The judge's role is to make legal determinations regarding placement and custody, and to preside over various legal proceedings regarding the child. The judge will hear from the various parties

involved in the case and make determinations based on the information that is presented. A case may be presented to a jury to decide on issues such as termination of parental rights, in which case the judge is responsible for conducting the trial according to the law.

CASA WORKERS

A CASA, or Court Appointed Special Advocate, is generally a volunteer layperson who may be assigned to your child as a guardian ad litem. The CASA is intended to be an independent, impartial person who can get to know the child and then make recommendations based on what they believe is in the child's best interests. A CASA has the legal right to visit the foster home and the biological parents' home as well as talk with school officials, therapists and anyone involved in the case to gather information to help them determine and advocate for the best interests of the child. This individual can often be a great ally in communicating to the court on behalf of the child.

CONTRACTED FOSTER CARE AGENCIES

Some foster systems contract with private foster agencies. These agencies provide many of the services needed to provide children with foster families. These services include recruiting and training families, conducting home studies, certifying or licensing families, supervising families during placement, submitting required reports, and more. If you are working through a contracted agency, this will be the entity with whom you have the most contact and who is responsible for providing the majority of support and guidance to you as foster parents.

SO WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

For those who become foster parents for the first time, it can be rather unsettling to discover that you don't necessarily get to call the shots. The government has the ultimate responsibility



for the child until permanency is achieved. There are many voices that compete in determining what constitutes the best care for the child. This can create a lot of tension and there can be significant disagreement among the people connected with the child's case. Combine this with the fact that many of the individuals involved have a number of other children on their case-loads, and you can imagine how confusing things can get. Hang in there. While it is true that you are not calling all the shots, you can have a voice and you can be actively involved in the lives of the children God has placed in your home.

DECIDING

The first step of any major process in life is the decision to move forward or not. We strongly believe that a conscious and deliberate decision-making process needs to occur prior to entering into a commitment with such great ramifications for so many lives. While you may feel that you already know you want to become a foster parent, we encourage you to spend the time to walk through this decision-making process. The following principles will prove helpful for later decisions that are part of the foster parent calling, including:

“How many children can our family care for well?”

“What kinds of issues do we believe we are equipped to handle?”

“Should we accept this particular placement?”

“Should we adopt this child who is now available for adoption?”

PRAYER

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. – Proverbs 3:5-6

Prayer is critical both at the beginning and throughout the fostering process. For married couples, praying together regularly is a must, and we believe that absolute agreement between spouses regarding God's calling is a prerequisite for becoming foster parents. Ask God to lead you in making decisions about fostering. Pray for Him to show you any wrong motivations that may be influencing your decision-making. Pray that He will give you courage to accept the calling He places on your life. Due to the powerful impact for good or ill that a foster parent has in a child's life, we believe it is necessary that you are certain that God is calling you specifically to this arena of ministry before you even begin the process.

GOD'S WORD

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and guide unto my path. – Psalm 119:105

Spending time reading and meditating on God's Word given to us in the Bible is a second, critical component to making wise and Godly decisions. While we will not find a specific verse that tells us whether or not to become foster parents, we can learn about God's heart, what is important to Him and what are His principles for living and making decisions. If we are seeking counsel from God in prayer, we should be opening His Word so that we may hear from Him.

GODLY COUNSEL

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers, they succeed. – Proverbs 15:22

Sometimes the best view into our hearts and souls is through the eyes of another person. It is important to seek counsel even when we're afraid we might not like what we hear. The best people to seek out are those who exhibit a close relationship with God and have a track record of making wise deci-

sions. In addition, people who know you well are important to seek counsel from, as well as people who have experience in foster care. It is important to remember, though, that not all advice is necessarily Godly advice and that ultimately you are responsible for making the decision and discerning God's will and calling on your life.

INFORMATION

The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. - Proverbs 18:15

Gathering accurate information about foster care is essential to making a wise decision. There are two common errors people make in deciding about fostering. The first error occurs when a decision is made not to foster before adequate and/or accurate information has been gathered. The second error occurs when people decide they will become foster parents based largely on emotional experiences rather than on adequate and accurate knowledge. Both of these mistakes can be avoided through careful collection of reliable information.

There are a number of great resources where you can find good information. In the appendix, we have provided links to a few of organizations that we have found to be solid sources of information about foster care. When visiting various websites, talking to professionals, and reading books and articles, it is important to keep in mind that those resources may not come from a Christian worldview. Use discernment in gathering information and if you are unsure how a perspective provided in a particular resource squares with God's Word, then ask a pastor, elder, or other trusted Godly leader in your life.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. - Psalm 139:23-24

Providing a loving home to a child in need is a great thing. However, many people have sought to do great things for the wrong reasons, and this can lead to frustration, heartache, and even harm to those we intend to help. Being honest with yourself about all of your motives and checking those against Scripture and God's call on your life is absolutely essential for you and for the child you may bring into your home.

It is possible that our decision to open our home to hurting children can be influenced by a desire to meet our own needs in some way. We must be vigilant that we do not allow our fleshly desires to guide our thinking. Some subtle, fleshly influences can include:

- Wanting to impress others
- Trying to earn God's favor through works
- Attempting to deal with pain or loss
- Trying to get rid of guilt
- Wanting to please or placate a spouse

All of these reasons and other self-driven motivations are a recipe for disaster if they influence our decision to become foster parents in any way.

THE MOST COMMON OBSTACLE

One of the most common reasons people give for not becoming foster parents is that they fear

taking in and falling in love with a child, only to have that child moved to another home. They don't want to subject themselves, or their children, to such heartache and pain. While this fear is understandable and very real, it is ultimately not biblical. The purpose of God's call to care for orphans is not to fill a need in your life, nor is it to help you avoid painful or difficult emotional experiences.

It is true that God calls us to care for orphans and He places the lonely in families, but He does not guarantee a particular child will always be in our family. God is a God of reconciliation and He gives us the ministry of reconciliation as well (2 Corinthians 5:18). If He chooses to use us in helping a birth mother (or father) get her/his life together and regain custody of a child, then we can celebrate and find joy in that. Remember, this is not about us and our desires, but about God and His, and whether or not we will make ourselves available for how God wants to use us. The bottom line is, if He calls you to foster care, will you trust Him, even in the face of possible pain and loss down the road?

THE PROCESS

The process to become a foster parent varies from state to state. Certain things are consistent, though. You must have a criminal background check, your home must be determined to be safe, and you must complete First Aid/CPR. There are many forms that you will need to fill out. There will be classes to attend. The process can be time-consuming, but our advice is to take things one step at a time, one form at a time, one class at a time. Before you know it, you will be licensed and able to accept your first placement. Contact your local foster care offices to learn more about the process in your state or county. This website [link to: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>] has a good search function for finding agencies and information.

CHOOSING A FOSTER CARE AGENCY

Depending on your state and location within that state, you may have the opportunity to choose among several different foster care agencies. If so, we suggest doing your homework and evaluating each of your options carefully. In addition to getting information from the agencies themselves, you should also seek input from people in your community who have knowledge of how those agencies practice. Orphan care ministries in local churches would be good places to seek information. Also, if you have a CASA organization in your community, you could inquire with them as well. You could also seek input from the state foster agency that may prove helpful. Possibly the best source would be past or current foster parents who have worked with the various agencies. Churches, support groups, CASA or the agencies themselves may help you identify who those parents are in your area.

STEPS IN THE PROCESS

Generally speaking, you can expect each of the following steps to be part of the process to becoming foster parents.

- *Application Process*

You will fill out what may seem like an endless number of forms. All of this is necessary to ensure that you are the type of family to which the system is able to entrust its most vulnerable children.

- *Training*

You will undergo training classes designed to help you be better equipped to address any issues you might encounter with the children, as well as with the system itself.

- *Background Checks*

You will undergo a background check so that the authorities will feel confident in knowing that you have no history that would jeopardize the safety of the children that will be placed in your

home.

- Home Study

The home study is necessary to ensure that not only are you safe, but so is your home. It involves a visit to your home during which interviews will take place with the parents, children and other adults living in the home.

- Certification/Licensing

When the application process, training, background checks, and home study are all completed and approved, you will receive your certification or license as foster parents. Based on your training and expressed wishes, and other factors, your license will indicate the maximum number of children you can care for, and any restrictions that may apply.

- Placement

Once you are certified or licensed, and you let your agency know you are ready, you will begin to receive calls telling you about children who need placement. You are not under any obligation to take any and every child about whom you are called. You will be told some basic information about the child (sometimes the system knows very little about a child when he or she is first removed), and you will be given the option of accepting or declining the placement.

KNOWING WHAT YOU CAN HANDLE

As part of the licensing process, you will likely be asked what types of children and issues you are willing to accept. While it may be tempting to be idealistic and just take any child your agency suggests, it is important to know your personal limits and the limits of your family. It is not only okay, but wise to turn down placements that you are not confident that you can handle. God prepares and equips each family differently. While some families can accept physically aggressive teenagers and do very well with them, another family with young or vulnerable children may be foolish to do so.

You have a responsibility to protect and care for the family you have as you are making a decision about accepting a child from foster care into your home. Saying yes to a child you are not equipped to handle will likely be harmful to you, your family and the child. The training that you will go through will help you begin to assess your family's capacity. Reading additional books and articles about foster care and trauma and neglect in children will also help you have a realistic assessment of what you and your family can handle. However, remember that God often calls us to operate outside of our comfort zone, and may desire for us to be willing to be stretched. This is obviously one of those decisions where utilizing Godly decision-making, including prayer and seeking wise counsel, becomes absolutely critical.

THE TREATMENT PLAN

Each child in the foster care system will have a case plan. That plan will likely change over time, depending on various factors, including the child's age, needs, birth family's progress, etc.

Generally speaking, when a child is first removed and taken into the system, the goal is to reunify that child with his or her biological family. In order for that to happen, the biological family will need to complete certain tasks and show the system that their home is a safe place to raise that child. The tasks may include such things as attending parenting classes, testing for drugs, treatment for addiction, anger management, consistent and appropriate visitation with their child, counseling, etc. If the parent is able to do what the court mandates her to do, then she will likely retain her right to parent her child and her child will be returned home. That is called

reunification and it is almost always the first case plan for a child who enters the system.

If reunification is the goal, the system will place and keep the child in foster care until reunification can occur. The social workers will often look for relatives to care for the child while in foster care. If no suitable home can be found with a relative, the child will be placed in a foster home.

If a parent is unable to demonstrate her ability to provide appropriate care, adoption becomes the preferred plan for the child. Often relatives are sought out in an effort to keep the child in his or her extended family of origin. If that is not possible or not in the best interests of the child, the current foster family is often given the opportunity to adopt the child. In the case where foster family adoption cannot occur, other families who are hoping to adopt are considered. In some circumstances, such as an older teen who does not want to be adopted or when no adoptive family is available, the plan becomes for that child to be emancipated from, or "age out" of, the foster care system, typically at 18 years of age.

AGING OUT

Each year, more than 25,000 children are denied the joys of successful reunification with their parents (or relatives) or the permanence of adoption. Instead, they languish in the foster system for months and more often years, wondering why no one wants to love them and why no one will call them son or daughter. They may desperately long for a mom and dad, but as each day passes their hopes wane, and they often blame the only person they know to blame...themselves. Eventually they may become hardened and unable to trust others, especially adults. When they reach adulthood, they emancipate, or age out. At this point, they are expected to make it in the real world, with little to no support and very often with no one to call and no place to stay. This is a population that is sorely in need of the Church and families to come alongside for guidance and support, and we mustn't give up on finding them permanent families even after they age out. Adult adoptions are relatively simple and can provide much needed love and support to young adults who do desperately need it.



WELCOMING A CHILD FROM FOSTER CARE INTO YOUR HOME

WHAT CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE NEED

While it may seem obvious, it is important to remember that the child who is coming into your home has been neglected and/or hurt in some way. God's design is for children to be raised in loving families with moms and dads to nurture, protect and teach them. When this design is not followed, it can have devastating effects on a child. An infant who has not been held, cuddled and rocked, or who has been hurt will have significant difficulty bonding and accepting love from his foster parents. A child who has been neglected and abused will instinctively distrust her foster parents and resist their loving authority and discipline and may act out in self-destructive ways.

On top of the harm done by whatever occurred to precipitate removal, these children experience tremendous loss and grief. Virtually everything familiar and comforting to them is gone and they have no control in the situation. As a result, it is important to recognize the grief and loss these children experience, listen with empathy, and help them cope in a healthy way. Also, working to facilitate visits with siblings and other family members is crucial, except in cases where visits are deemed to be potentially harmful to the child.

We know from research that abuse and neglect change how the brain develops in profound ways. We also know that a loving and responsive home environment is the best therapy available for children who have experienced such trauma. The developmental and behavioral problems that many of these children exhibit can cause frustration and confusion for inexperienced and unprepared foster parents. For this reason, it is imperative that parents called to foster children must do their due diligence to prepare themselves well by gaining the knowledge and training they need to care for the child God brings them.

As foster parents, we must also remember that it is not our job to heal the child -- that is God's responsibility. Our job is to be faithful to the call He has placed on our lives. And no matter what behaviors the child exhibits, we must recognize he or she is coming from a place of deep pain, and resist the urge to take the behaviors personally. We must always remember, our foster care journey is not about us; it is about God's glory in using us to bring His healing love to a child.

CHILDREN FROM FOSTER CARE AND THEIR PLACE IN MY HOME

We must not buy into the philosophy that we as foster parents are simply employees, or contracted workers housing and feeding the children sent to us by the government. This mindset leads to a very dangerous way of thinking, a way of looking at these children as objects to be cared for rather than precious children made in the image of God and placed by Him into our homes for a specific purpose. We must ask God to give us His love and heart for each child He brings into our home. We must commit to care for them with the same intensity and devotion that we give to the children already in our homes – whether biological, adoptive, or foster. If we treat them as second-class citizens, they will see themselves as such and it will further harm them. If we treat them with dignity, love, and respect, they will begin to see themselves in a different light, and God can use our love for them to help bring healing and wholeness to their brokenness.

DISCIPLINE

Some prospective foster parents are frustrated when they hear that they cannot use corporal pun-

ishment (spanking) to discipline children in foster care. As many Christian parents view corporal punishment as a viable, and even necessary, form of discipline, this issue can cause tension among Christians considering foster parenting. There are some good reasons for this prohibition of spanking that will likely become more clear as you learn more about the impact of trauma on children. Other training and disciplinary strategies are part of the training you will receive and you would do well to continue your own education about parenting children who have been hurt beyond the training provided by your agency.

While you may not agree with the disciplinary restrictions, it is far more important for a child to be placed in a home in which he or she will be loved and cared for and have the opportunity to come to know Christ, than it is for the parents to be allowed to use corporal punishment. The Bible is abundantly clear in its call for God's people to care for the orphans of the world and makes no exceptions to this call.

BEING AN ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD

One important aspect of being a foster parent is recognizing the need to advocate for the children placed in your home. This advocacy is obviously needed in court and with the social workers, in order to keep the child safe, meet any special needs, and to determine the most appropriate placement for that child. But advocacy may also be needed in other settings such as his or her school, or at church, at the doctor or dentist, or even with extended family. Many of the children placed in our homes have significant deficits that are not easily recognized by those who don't know their history or don't have the experience to understand the impact of that history on a child's functioning. As the acting parent, it is our responsibility to speak up for that child in situations where they cannot speak up for themselves (Proverbs 31:8). We should be loving and gracious as we advocate, but we should also be zealous as we seek justice in these different settings and situations.

PREPARING OTHERS

Preparing others for the arrival of your child may seem like an odd thing to do. If you are going to have a baby through pregnancy, you certainly wouldn't sit down and prepare your friends and extended family for the baby's arrival. You would simply expect your friends and family to accept and love that child as a new member of the family.

Sadly, it is often not so simple with kids who are placed into your home for foster care. Sometimes friends and family will not understand what you are doing and why you are bringing a child from foster care into your home. Some friends and family members may question you, or challenge you, or criticize you, or even ostracize you. If that happens, keep your focus on God and His call on your lives. If God has called you to foster care, it may take time for others to understand that call. Be willing to create some distance if needed for the sake of the child, but also continue to nurture your existing relationships and try to help others understand, accept and embrace their role in helping support you and the child for the glory of God.

As for preparing children already in your home, you need to provide them with information about what is happening and assurances about things they fear. They may feel very insecure as children come into your home (and as children leave your home, as well). You need to be aware of those insecurities and find ways to address them. You

need to help them understand how fostering fits into God's plan for the world, for your family and for the child coming into your home. Through this preparation process you need to continually reinforce your words with actions, by holding them close, physically and emotionally, and assuring them that you have enough love for another child without taking anything away from them.

YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

It is vital that you have a strong support system in place if you are going to be involved in the foster system over the long haul. There are challenges that come from the system, from the children, from others in your life who perhaps "don't really get it", and more. It is so important that you surround yourself with others who have been there and can listen and give you wise and Godly counsel during difficult times.

It is also important that you surround yourself with others to support you in various ways – including respite care so that you can get much-needed breaks from time to time. If people in your church offer to help with meals, diapers, errands, etc., let them. They are likely responding to God's call on them to support those caring for the fatherless in your community, and so you need to welcome their efforts to do so. If help does not come on its own, you need to be pro-active and ask for it. There are likely people who want to help but truly don't know how, and they may just need some educating and guidance from you.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is no accident that you are reading this information. God has a purpose and has apparently turned your heart in the direction of vulnerable children. If you perceive God calling you to become a foster parent, we encourage you to pursue that calling with everything you have. However, not all of us are called to be foster parents.

God teaches us that the body has many parts with different functions. The hand should not believe it is more spiritual than the ear (I Cor. 12:20-26). Sometimes when we see such intense needs and our hearts are moved toward children who are suffering as a result of abuse or neglect, we may assume that we must become the direct solution to that suffering. However, foster parenting is a calling and as a result, regardless of what you are feeling, you must answer the second critical question: *Has God called you to be a foster parent?*

If He has, we want to encourage you and help you in that process. But if not, there are a number of ways that you can look after these children in their distress (James 1:27) other than becoming a foster parent. Some of them include:

- Praying for children in foster care
- Praying for children waiting to be adopted
- Praying for those called to be foster parents
- Supporting those who are foster parents by providing meals or child care or helping out with household duties to give them a break
- Getting to know, supporting, and praying for the social workers in your county
- Becoming a CASA and speaking up for children in court
- Helping organize an orphans ministry in your local church
- Finding ways to serve and support youth who have aged out of the foster care system such as through mentoring

APPENDIX

HELPFUL LINKS & RESOURCES

Focus on the Family – Wait No More
www.icareaboutorphans.org

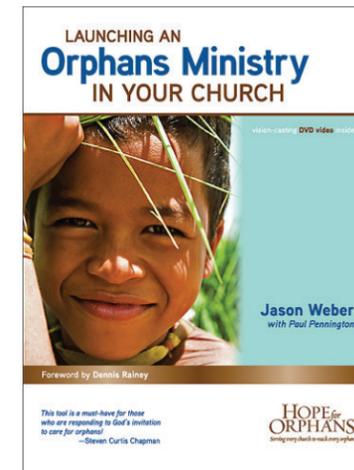
4KIDS of South Florida
www.4kidsofsfl.org

Project 127 of Colorado
www.project127.com

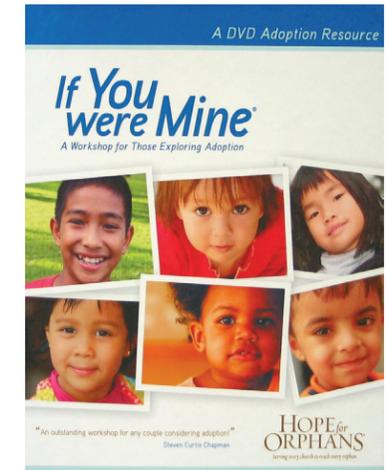
The CALL of Arkansas
www.thecallinarkansas.org

Adopt US Kids
www.adoptuskids.org/for-families/how-to-foster

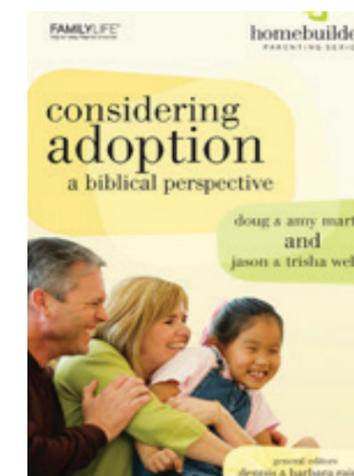
Child Welfare Information Gateway
www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/foster_care



LAUNCHING AN ORPHANS MINISTRY IN YOUR CHURCH



IF YOU WERE MINE DVD WORKSHOP



CONSIDERING ADOPTION: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE



10 WAYS TO FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN TO CARE FOR THE ORPHAN & CHILD IN FOSTER CARE