

FOSTER: 'It changes the entire dynamic of our home'

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parents need to have a love of children, but they also need more than that—a willingness to stay with a child even when the going gets tough.

Shane and Malia Witham have fostered 24 kids over a period of six and half years. Malia and Shane also have three of their own "forever" children in the home, in addition to the children they foster. But they don't usually make this distinction when they have a foster child in the home: "We're not babysitters, we're parents," Shane said.

Foster parenting is a task that requires the involvement of one's entire community—not just those acting as foster parents, but also their own kids, their extended families, their circle of friends.

"It's a family affair, it is not just my husband and I, because it changes the entire dynamic of our home," said Malia.

Incorporating foster kids into the dynamic of one's home requires acceptance of the children as they are, not as one would like them to be. This requires adjusting one's expectations of behavior.

Kids who come into one's home from somewhere else are often used to different routines, and in the case of kids coming into foster care, these routines often aren't ideal for the children's age group.

Ratliff described a one-year-old she fostered who threw his food on the ground when she put him in a high chair for snack time. Usually when a small child throws their food, Ratliff said, it means they're done eating.

But when Ratliff took the child out of the chair, she saw him trying to eat off the floor. She realized he was throwing food because he wasn't used to eating in a high chair.

"He wasn't done, he wanted to eat in a more comfortable

environment," she said. Especially when working with young foster children, who can't yet articulate their needs, listening to behaviors and adjusting one's sense of a "normal routine" accordingly is important.

As opposed to forcing the child to eat in a high chair immediately, she tried to find safe, but less restrictive places in the kitchen to feed him. "Their worlds have been flipped upside down," she said, just by coming into care, so one shouldn't force change too quickly.

"Over time, we gradually work on that to get them to healthy, scheduled routines that are appropriate for their age," she said.

Malia noted that while fostering is truly challenging, the impact a foster home can have on a child is immense. Throughout our conversation, the Withams referenced a sibling set of three who lived with them for two years before moving on to live with their biological relatives a year ago. They still keep in touch and provide respite care for the kids on occasion.

The three kids came to the Witham household with high needs and intense behaviors, but over the course of the three years they've known those siblings, they saw how their supportive environment allowed the kids to grow.

"The growth that we've seen from when they moved in with us to now, you can see in behaviors what unconditional love, what stability, what routine, all of those things that were not a part of their lives before, it changes them," Malia said. "They are different kids."

One of the most challenging parts of being a foster parent is letting go and saying goodbye to the foster kids, especially when they've been in the home for an extended period of time.

And that's often a reason people cite for not becoming a foster parent, because it would hurt too much to give up a child they've developed a bond with.

But foster parents are supposed to get too attached. That's

part of their job.

"They need us to be heartbroken when they leave, because that means that we loved them with every part of our being and that's what we do," Malia said. "It is hard. And

sometimes I wonder how many times can we do it. At what point does your heart say I can't break anymore? I don't know. We're not there yet. It is the hardest thing we've ever done, but they're worth it!"

To find out more about becoming a foster parent, adoptive parent, or short-term respite care provider, visit MarionFosterOrAdopt.com, where you can contact local foster parent certifiers.

Every a home

By CASEY CHAFFIN

SHANE & MALIA WITHAM

Shane and Malia Witham have been fostering for six and a half years. Shane works as a city planner in Keizer and Malia works as a stay-at-home mom. Their fostering journey began on the flight back from a mission trip to Uganda, when Malia felt challenged in her prayers to do good in Keizer. She asked herself and her family, "What is my mission here in Keizer?" Soon after, she and Shane certified as short-term foster respite care, but ultimately began fostering full-time.

Over this six-and-a-half year period, Shane said he has adapted his role as a father to consider the needs of the foster kids he and his wife Malia bring into their home.

"I think sometimes people look at parenting, just regular old parenting, as I'm the parent and I'm the boss and I'll have rules and boundaries. I'm there to fix things, to protect things, and to be the person in charge," Shane said. But when a child has been traumatized and abandoned, they're not a problem to be "fixed"—they're a complex person that needs to be loved and listened to, even when they're throwing a tantrum.

"They're going to freak out about cereal or whatever silly thing, because that's a way they can control something because their life has been chaos," Shane said. And dealing with these behaviors takes a different approach to parenting than many have been socialized with.

"One of the most effective ways of getting them to be okay, is just to be with them," Shane said. If one of his foster kids was having a tantrum, "I wouldn't say a word, but I'd go in [to their room] and just hang out with them, and say, 'Aw buddy, I'm sorry you're having a hard time' but not forcing them, 'Tell me what's wrong, you can't do that,'" Shane said. "I think in a lot of these situations where children lack that trust, we have to earn that trust, by being consistent, by being loving and caring."



BRIGETT & MIKE EISELE

Brigett Eisele and her husband Mike have been fostering kids for about two years. She works as a nurse full-time, and her husband works full-time as well. They now have two of their own kids, ages 12 and 14, and usually foster one or two children under the age of six.

Eisele's first experience with the foster care system came when she was a first-grade teacher in the Portland area in the early 2000's. She regularly had students who were in various stages of foster care in her classes, and learned an important lesson about supporting them in her capacity as a teacher.

She came to understand that "the academics I had to teach them was not the most important part of their life." As a teacher without kids of her own

at the time, she could spend time "making sure their basic needs were met," so they could thrive in an educational environment.

Now, as a full-time foster parent, she can have a fuller role in their lives, "including them in what our family would normally do," she said.

It's important, however, to understand one's capacity to bring foster kids into the home. "Not everyone can take every kind of kid," she said, and different kids need different environments to thrive.

"Recognizing what your family can handle, setting boundaries and sticking to them" is essential to being a successful foster family, she said. Because when a family doesn't exceed their capacity to care for the children in their home, those children get the care they need: full and undivided love and attention.

Eisele said people tell her they could never foster because they'd get too attached to the kids. However, she said, "That's what they need. You are supposed to get attached and you're supposed to make them 100 percent part of your family."

GWEN & MIKE SLIPPY

Gwen Slippy has worked in the local child welfare office for five years and currently fills the District 3 (encompassing the Marion, Polk, and Yamhill counties) role of foster parent recruitment and retention specialist. Her entrance into working with the system did not begin as a DHS worker, however. Her first seven years of engagement with the foster care system were in the role of a foster parent, alongside her husband, Mike.

Slippy became a foster parent in response to the methamphetamine crisis of the early 2000s, when a huge influx of kids entered foster care. "We drove a 12-passenger van and often traveled with 10-plus people in it. Our family of origin was four at the time, so we often fostered six children at a time," she said.

Her two biological children were always involved in the process, and Slippy and her husband adopted two children out of the foster care system during their time as foster parents.

Foster parents will emphasize how



important communicating with their "forever" children is in the fostering process, and making sure family cohesion isn't stressed beyond repair during their time as foster parents. But foster parents, including Slippy, also emphasize how engaged their own

children were in supporting the youth they brought into the household—and that whole-family engagement is part of what makes a foster family successful.

"Our children were young and it was just a part of who we were as our children were growing up," she said, adding: "When we didn't have a full house — our two biological children would always ask in anticipation, 'When will new kids come?' and sometimes they would wake up in the morning and there would be several new faces at the kitchen table."

Her perspective on the foster care system has broadened since working within DHS.

"The need is great and I had no idea just how great until coming to work for the Agency. ... Understanding the whole picture of Child Welfare was a completely different perspective than when I was a foster parent. My focus was very narrow when fostering; it was all about loving and nurturing children, guiding and providing for their needs and doing what we could to help families reunify," she said.

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