

No Matter Where: We Go, You Go

By Patricia Nordstrom

60TH CELEBRATION



When you sign up to be a foster parent you take on many different roles and accept the responsibility of another human life. It is your responsibility to keep them safe, healthy and happy. You promise to make this child a part of your family and to not treat them "as a foster child".

Our family had been preparing a trip to California to visit all the attractions for quite some time. We had made plans for our older children to be excused from school, the hotels were booked and all of our tickets had been purchased. Everyone was so excited to go and the trip was only a few weeks away. Through various circumstances a 10 year old foster child came to live with us just a week before our trip. We did not have tickets purchased for him and would need to reconfigure our hotel rooms and car space. There were so many things to think about and make arrangements for. Yet, when we brought him home, we had told him that he was going to come live with us for a while and be a part of our family. This would mean going everywhere our family went and being a part of all the experiences and memories. It was not easy getting everything together so quickly for him to come. It was a little frantic, but our worker was there to help us make it happen.

I remember the look on his face when we told him about the trip we had planned. The excitement in his eyes is one that I will never forget. He was not only excited about the trip, but so happy that he was being treated as a family member. When we were on our vacation, it was fun to see all my children having fun and see the sadness leave this child's eyes. I remember when we lined up for a family photo and he quietly slide himself over to the side out of the picture. My husband put his arm around him and said "Where are you going? It is time for a family photo." At first he was shy about being in the pictures but as the trip continued his confidence, smile and personality came out. He proudly stood in all the pictures and no longer hid in the background. We took several pictures of him and said they were for him to keep or share with his parents.

We were not a family on a trip with a foster child, but a family making memories.

We hung the pictures of our trip on our walls and would talk and laugh about all the fun we had together. I can't imagine the pain we could have

put him through had we chosen to leave him behind. He would have never felt like a part of our family unit if we had all these memories that he did not share.

Raising foster children is a team effort and everyone is equally committed to provide the best care possible for the children. Respite is not a tool to use when we want a break from the children or plan a family trip but do not want to include the foster children. It is hard for these children to be away from their biological families and then feel like they are not a part of your family. There may be circumstances that arise where respite is necessary and can make the children a priority while we deal with family emergencies or health problems. We never want to send the message to the children that "we need a break from you, or that you are not a part of our family."

Our foster son had an essay due for school several months after the trip. In his essay he wrote about the vacation and what it meant to him. He wrote about how he was sad and scared to come and live with us and be away from his family. He was not sure what to expect or how he would blend in with our family. The essay talked about how he had never had an opportunity like this before in his life. It was a memory he was going to remember forever. The paragraph in the essay that meant the most was his closing one. It said "I am so thankful to my foster parents for making me a part of their family. I was included in all of the family pictures and activities just like all the other kids. When we were on vacation I was not a foster child from a broken home, but part of a family. No one around could look at me and tell everything that I had been through. I was a normal kid out having fun and had no worries. This trip will be some of the best memories of my life and I will always be grateful."

Being a foster parent is a chance to make a difference in a child's life. It is not an easy job and comes with a lot of challenges. Yet, we have the power to make a difference and the opportunity to change lives. The children are a part of your family and go on all family trips and adventures together. As a foster parent our mind set needs to be "Where I go, you go."