

More than 75 Sonoma County children and teens are waiting for foster - adoptive families



Become a Foster Parent

Help a Child
Heal a Family
Enrich Your Life



Human Services Department



Family, Youth and Children's Services (707) 565-4274

Too many kids are waiting for healing foster families



by **Jerry Dunn**
Director, Human
Services Department

The well-being and protection of our children and teens is the heart of the **Family, Youth and Children's Services'** mission. We ensure that kids are safe at home and treated with the care they need to thrive. When concerns of neglect or abuse mean that children must temporarily live away from home, we strive to reunite children with their parents whenever possible. Here your help is vital.

To meet Sonoma County foster children's needs, we must double the number of foster homes.

To care for all the foster children in need, at least 28 new foster families must become licensed each year, adults who can offer a loving, stable, healing home during a time when a child's biological family needs support. Foster parents can be single, two-parent couples, gay couples or families with children.

Can you offer a safe, temporary home — for a day, a few months or longer — for children who may return to their families once their home is safe?

Becoming a foster family is also the first step to adopting children who cannot return to their parents. As a foster - adopt parent myself, my son enriched my family, and he had the healing of a permanent home. Becoming a foster parent made a difference in both our lives.

Help us care for our children —
become a foster parent

Who makes a good foster family?

Healing happens in caring relationships. Foster families are a healing intervention for children and teens in foster care and their struggling families. When cared for in safe, loving families, foster children have a better chance to heal from the neglect or trauma they may have experienced. They need foster families who understand them — where they come from and who they are inside — who can help them navigate their way through all life brings. Being a foster parent is also a chance to enrich your life and your family's life in meaningful relationship with a child in need.

Foster parents are people you know — friends, neighbors and relatives — all caring for children during a traumatic time in their lives and their biological families' lives. They receive a stipend to help them provide for children's material needs while in their care. They are supported by Family, Youth and Children's Services social workers and ongoing training and connections with other foster families.

Successful foster parents share some specific qualities, including the flexibility to adjust their expectations. They learn and use positive parenting techniques to build trust and a stable, healing

home. Foster parents have excellent communication skills, work well with the rest of team (including Family, Youth and Children's Services and the child's biological family and community). They know they are not alone in this important work. They know when to ask for and seek support through their personal networks or our vibrant foster parent community, such as the Redwood Empire Foster Parent Association.

We aren't looking for perfect — we are looking for loving and patient families who understand how to help children cope with tough times so that they grow stronger. We look for those who can be strong advocates for foster children, and not give up if things don't always go their way. They need to be able to negotiate with all the important people in a child's life, allowing each to have a voice. Children have better lives when the community that surrounds them works together.

If this sounds like you, Sonoma County's kids need you. Call Family, Youth and Children's Services to discuss becoming a foster parent. Even if you're not sure, call us. We'll talk through your questions and discuss your concerns. We can help you decide if helping heal a foster child is a gift that you and your family can give. We look forward to hearing from you.



Learn about helping kids by becoming a foster-adoptive parent—
call Family, Youth and Children's Services today • (707) 565-4274

From newborns to young adults, kids need places to call home

You're never too young or old to need a healing home and family. Many of Sonoma County's foster children and young adults are waiting for just that -- and a place to call home.

Who are foster children? They are children you know, kids who you see on the school playground, or who live down the block.

- Seven-year-old **Diana's** parents have mental health and substance abuse challenges, so she has gone without food or clean clothes for days at a time. She needs a stable, healing foster family to assure her that she will always have enough to eat and clothes to wear to school.
- **Joey Jr. and Esperanza** live in a group home while they wait for a Spanish-speaking foster family. Their mom neglected and physically abused them. Joey's teacher called the child abuse hotline when she saw bruising on his face and arms.
- **Robert** had three foster homes before he moved in with his foster-to-adopt family. His adoption

will be final just before his 17th birthday. He loves knowing he has a permanent home and caring parents when he needs them.

From babies to teens to 21-year-olds, every foster child has different needs for care, support and mentoring. Many entered foster care after experiencing neglect at home. Some were harmed by emotional or physical abuse. Others have special needs or are medically fragile. They are many races and ethnicities, including those who come from Spanish-speaking homes. Teens and young adults who are in school or working need stable parents who can teach them the life skills needed for their transition to independence.

Foster children may be leaving their biological families for the first time, or moving to a foster family from another foster home, a licensed group home or Sonoma County's Valley of the Moon Children's Center.

No matter a foster child's circumstances or background, living with and staying connected to a healing foster family makes a positive impact throughout their lives.

Ready for a Forever Home



Being a foster parent is the first step toward adopting a child, such as 12-year-old Abby, a bright and inquisitive girl who would thrive with an attentive, patient family who can help her manage her special needs and reach her full potential.

Abby enjoys school, as well as dressing up for special events. She stays active through hiking, biking, skating, playing basketball and swimming. Since she enjoys horses, she's participating in therapeutic riding activities. She has beautiful handwriting and uses an iPad as a learning and communication tool. She is also learning American Sign Language to communicate.

Thriving with friends who become family

Nine years ago, Jessica's life changed. Home wasn't safe for her and her siblings, so Family, Youth and Children's Services came in to help. The children were moved to foster care at the Valley of the Moon Children's Home, with a goal of eventually reunifying the family, or moving the children to a foster family where Jessica's siblings could stay together.

A school friend's parents, who knew Jessica well, learned about her need for a foster family, and generously offered all the kids a home. They continued to live in the same community and go to the same schools. With the couple's three biological daughters, the family grew to 10.

Since returning to her biological family wasn't possible, Jessica was happy to be part of such a close-knit family. Her foster parents, she says, were the "first stable adults I had in my life." "They really stepped up at a time I really needed it, when I was really vulnerable," Jessica says.



Front to back: Emily Moi, Aaron Moi, Jessica Banales, Laurel Mohring, Nicole Mohring, Tina Moi, Wendy Wellander, Danny Banales, Glenn Mohring, Max Moi

They were so welcoming -- they made me feel as if I was their kid. "

Her new family helped "alter the course of my life and build my goals and dreams." With their support, Jessica graduated from high school, and now college. "If not for my foster family's belief in me and teaching me to believe in myself," she says she wouldn't be graduating from Sonoma State University this month with a double major in Early Childhood Studies and Psychology, and considering a Master's Degree in Social Work. Her career goal speaks to her own experience -- to be an advocate for foster and at-risk youth and help them heal from neglect or abuse.

Using her foster parents as role models, she says good candidates are loving and compassionate. They "make home a safe zone," where children can "count on you 100%." To children waiting for healing foster families, she offers a message of hope: "I thought I was alone. But you're not alone and it'll get better, you will leave the dark tunnel."

Your Next Steps

to help us meet the needs of
Sonoma County foster children
and become a foster parent

Here are some ideas to help you
decide if your family is ready to
bring a foster child into your lives:

- Call Family, Youth and Children's Services for answers to your questions – (707) 565-4274.
- Visit www.sonomafostercare.org.
- Read foster parent blogs.
- Attend a Foster Family Information Session on the first Wednesday of each month.
- Talk with foster parents and children you know about their experiences.
- See stories of foster youth online.



"Empower. Support. Protect"

Human Services Department

"We receive far more than we give!" A foster family's story

**Natalie and Tom Stolzheise wanted children.
In their 10 years as a foster family, they've had 46.**

While adopting a young relative, the couple learned about the need for more families to provide children an immediate or emergency home when needed.

Since becoming licensed foster parents, they have cared for newborns just 26 hours old to teens, some single children and others with siblings. They've cared for a foster child for as little as 19 hours and as long as 22 months.

"We got into foster parenting because we love children," Natalie says. "We see ourselves as a bridge of safety, not as taking someone else's child away."

The foster children who join their "helping family" are eased into the transition not only by Natalie and Tom, but by their two sons. Caring for foster children, Natalie says, "means the whole family is involved." Tom says he especially enjoys doing "the fun stuff" with all the kids on weekends. One delicious monthly family ritual is eating the cinnamon rolls they make together from scratch.

The couple notes that, like all children, foster kids bring both joy and challenges. Sometimes being a foster parent "is a hard job," Natalie says. "It's not easy raising someone else's child." She says it's important that foster parents be flexible, able to give and take in order to meet the child's and the family's needs. Asking for support from Family, Youth and Children's Services and other foster parents is also key, she says. "We came into this to help children. We stay in it because of our amazing foster parent community, many who have become close friends."

A good foster parent, she says, works well within the foster care system's rules and regulations, and with the people supporting their foster child. That can include the child's social worker, therapist, doctor, lawyer, biological parents and family members.



K. (left) came to live with the Stolzheise family in 2013

Through e-mail and Facebook, Natalie stays in touch with many of the children who have returned to their parents or been adopted. The family visits or attends birthday parties when possible. She's often asked if it's hard to let go of her foster kids. "If you do your job right and love unconditionally, YOU BET IT HURTS!," she says. "However, the sting of loss is worth all the joy our hearts are filled with when we help a child transition, bond, grow and thrive! Believe me when I tell you that we receive far more than we give!"

If you think you can open your home to a foster child, the process starts with a phone call to our social workers. So many children are waiting for loving homes. Please consider helping us fill the gap by becoming a foster family.