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Welcoming a Foster Child Into Your Home

Madeleine Melcher

You have done it. You have chosen to make a difference in children's lives. You have made the first steps in becoming a foster parent, but now you are unsure if you are truly ready to welcome a child in the way you need to. Having spent a very brief time in care before finding my own forever family, there is a special place in my heart for those of you that take in these children who arrive at your door with perhaps only a plastic bag full of clothing or maybe only the clothing on their back.

You are not alone. So many foster parents have gone before you, each navigating the best way to greet a new foster child. Dr. John DeGarmo and his wife have welcomed dozens of children into their home over the last decade. Dr. DeGarmo is also a speaker and advocate, as well as the author of *The Foster Parenting Manual: A Practical Guide to Creating a Loving, Safe and Stable Home*; *A Different Home: A New Foster Child's Story* (a great picture book to keep for when a new child comes to your home); and *Keeping Foster Children Safe Online*, which releases in April. Needless to say, he is a great resource for new foster parents and for answers to my questions about making a new foster child feel welcome and comfortable.

So, you have finished your training and gotten your first placement call, what do you do? According to DeGarmo, one of the most important things you can do as you prepare for the arrival of a foster child is to find out as much about their history and background as possible: "Do not be concerned if you have a large number of questions for your caseworker when you are

first approached about of a placement of a child in your house. While the caseworker may not have all the answers, you will find valuable information by asking.”

Some questions DeGarmo suggests asking include:

- How old is the child?
- Why is the child in care?
- How long might the child stay with you?
- Will the child need day care supervision?
- Does the child have any learning disabilities or special needs of any kind?
- Does the child have any anger management or extreme emotional issues that you need to be aware of?
- Is this the first time the child has been in foster care?
- Are the child’s medical shots up to date?
- Are there any medical concerns?
- Is the child from the same town?
- Does the child need to be enrolled in your local school system?
- Does the child have clothes?
- Will you need to buy diapers and baby wipes?

Once you have agreed to a placement, your welcome will begin as soon as the caseworker pulls up in your driveway. When you go to the car, with a soft voice and a smile, introduce yourself to the caseworker and child. According to DeGarmo, you will quickly become a source of information for your foster child as you explain to he or she who you are and the role you will now play in his life. “He may very well not understand the foster care system, or what foster parents do.”

Do not insist that your new foster child call you mom or dad. In fact, DeGarmo says it is wise that you never insist upon this. “The word ‘mom’ may refer to the person who beat him. ‘Dad’ may be the person who left his family. Allow your foster child to call you by your first names, if you feel comfortable with this, or by whatever name he feels comfortable in calling you. As the child may be scared, do not insist that he react to you right away. This is a time of extreme difficulty, and your foster child may be in a state of shock.”

As you help him inside with his possessions, take him by the hand if he is a little one, or place a soft hand upon his shoulder if he is a teenager. “Actions like these can be reassuring that all will be okay, that he is in a safe and caring home.” But at the beginning, DeGarmo says there is a line, “Do not insist upon hugging, as he may be too embarrassed or hurt to do so.”

After all introductions to the entire family have been made, take him on a tour of your house—his new home. DeGarmo suggests showing him or her where they will sleep, and where their clothes will be kept is a good start, “Have a nightlight already on in the room, if the room is dark.” DeGarmo offered another tip some of you may have used when selling a home, “The smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies is always a welcome one in any home, particularly for

children.” Ask if he is hungry, and offer him some food. “If he doesn’t want any food, do not insist upon it.” Says DeGarmo, “He will eat when he is ready and hungry.”

As soon as possible, take some time to sit down and talk with your new foster child. DeGarmo suggests it is important to discuss the rules of your home, as well as your expectations of the child. “Listen to him, and encourage him to ask questions. This is an important time for your family, as you begin to form a relationship with your foster child. Spend time with him, and try to get to know him; his likes and dislikes, his fears and concerns, his hopes and dreams. If he wants, allow him to speak about his family. He may wish to brag about them to you. Do not judge his biological parents; instead, listen with an open ear and open heart, allowing him to see this, as it will encourage trust in you. Encourage him to put up pictures of his biological parents, birth family members, previous foster parents, and other important people in his life. Let him know that you understand how important these people are in his life.”

Finally, remember, some of the questions that lay heavily on your mind are on the child’s mind too. According to DeGarmo, “One of the difficulties that all encounter in the foster care system, whether it be foster parent, child, or caseworker, is the lack of information alongside the many questions that a placement brings with it. How long will the child remain in the foster home? When will the child see the parents next? How often can he visit with his family members? These are questions that will weigh heavy on your child’s mind. Make sure you answer each question as honestly as you can. If you are unsure of an answer, let him know it, and reassure him that you will attempt to find out and let him know.”

I cannot end this article without first saying, “thank you” to all of you that have chosen to give of yourself as foster parents. Thank you for all you are doing for these children who need you. You make a difference for each child that comes into your home!



Dr. John & His wife, with 2 of their children, both adopted from foster care.

Do you have experience with children in foster care? What helped ease the transition to your home? Tell us in the comments below.

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