

A Foster Parent's Tool Box

The journey of providing foster care is dotted with “a-ha” moments along the way. Over time, we pick up new information and strategies, process challenges through new lenses, and receive relevant suggestions from others in our expanding network of those who have journeyed before us. It often seems like our lives, and ultimately the lives of the children in our care, could have eased “if only we had known this sooner,” or “had that tool in our back pockets from the beginning.” Karri Bartlett and her husband, Nate Toth, have been providing foster care in Dane County for about two-and-a-half years, learning and collecting tools over time. Karri shared some of her wisdom in hopes that it can provide an “a-ha” for others who may be in the midst of what can sometimes feel like an uphill climb.

As it turns out, Karri and Nate’s most valuable “tools” are not literal things. They come in the form of ideas, education, perspective shifts, emotional supports, and deeper understanding. Unfortunately, there isn’t a “life app” that we can just tap up on our smart phones to make everything work the way we want it to. But our figurative tools tend to open up new possibilities in how effectively we parent and how we can best support the wellbeing and long-term success of the children in our care.



Karri describes her and Nate’s motivation as foster parents simply as, “doing our part to make sure that these kids are productive members of society.” She goes on to explain that, to her, that means that the children in their care grow with stability, love, and other key fundamentals while being able to heal from any wounds they may carry. Some important tools in the Bartlett-Toth household include:

- Initiating necessary services for the children in order to set them and their families up for success
- Establishing trusting co-parenting relationships
- Balancing structure and routine for the children with immense flexibility on the part of Karri and Nate as parents
- Seeking support and respite, knowing that a healthy caregiver is better able to offer of themselves
- Soaking up as much education and information as possible about the needs of the children in your care

Services

Karri makes sure to promptly align services (medical, dental, therapy, educational – anything to support the child’s physical and emotional needs) for the kids in their

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Tools Needed to Survive an Allegation

When individuals or families choose to become foster parents, they do so to help children in their communities and to provide a safe place for them—they open their hearts and homes and become licensed with good intentions. So, when an allegation occurs, it can leave foster parents reeling. A system they worked within is now investigating them. Foster parents are left feeling a range of emotions from fear, disbelief, shame, and bewilderment—all of which are common feelings when faced with dealing with an allegation.

Veteran foster parents often say that it is not *if* you will face an allegation, it is *when*. Foster parents are told of the possibility that they may face an allegation during training or during the licensing process, though that is certainly not the same as going through such an experience. Allegations can vary from a misinterpreted trigger from a child with a trauma history to a licensing violation. Regardless of the particulars and details, the experience of facing an allegation can be both painful and scary. Being prepared and knowing where to turn for support can help make the process a bit less stressful.

We spoke with Sherry Benson and Tina Christopherson from the Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA) and asked them to share with us the tools foster parents need in order to survive an allegation. Following are some of the suggestions they offered to help protect yourself, as well as the children you provide care for:



- *Document, document, document!* Keeping track of phone calls and conversations with workers and other providers can help. Document behaviors observed and information disclosed to you by a child in your care—anything that may leave you feeling uncertain or wary—better to have it and not need it. It can help provide information during an allegation.
- *Seek out help and support.* One of the most important things, say Sherry and Tina, is, “Don’t be afraid to ask questions or ask for help. The more knowledge you have the better; knowledge is power.”

WFAPA (www.wfapa.org) has a program to help foster families who may be going through an investigation of an allegation. The Foster & Adoptive Support & Preservation Program (FASPP), www.wfapa.org/faspp.htm, is a volunteer peer network that was developed to help support adoptive and foster parents who are experiencing investigations of allegations and provides a supportive and safe place for parents to talk about what they are going through. Sherry and Tina both recommend that foster parents talk to someone, ask questions, and ask for help, whether from a confidant, a support group, or therapist.

- *Take care of yourself.* “Try to keep your life as normal as possible and make sure you take care of yourself,” advise both Sherry and Tina. “Make self-care a priority and don’t make any big life decisions during this time.”

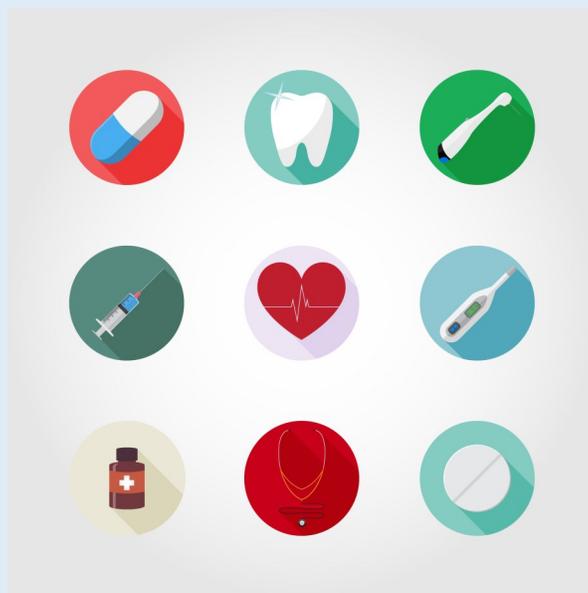
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care. She says, "Whether they're with us for a few weeks or a year, I feel like it's our job to help them get the best that they can get during that time." Karri recognizes that these services are tools for facilitating success for these children, which is at the core of her intention as a foster parent.

Advocating as a foster parent for quality and relevant services is important, too. Karri encourages other foster parents to communicate consistently with a child's therapist, for example, and work with the feedback given for continuity for the child. When looking into daycare providers, she recommends asking questions about whether they take short-term placements, whether they have experience with children in foster care, and how they perceive and respond to behavioral challenges. "Do they have experience and education related to childhood

trauma?" Karri notes that programs like Head Start have many additional supports, such as social workers on site, connections with a wealth of resources, and experience working with visit schedules, co-parenting boundaries, and more. In Karri and Nate's experience, Birth to Three services have provided fantastic support. "They were able to identify what the kids were getting from the behavior and how to channel it into a positive behavior. They've been a great resource."



Co-parenting

Through Karri's work, her life experiences, and her education, she has had the privilege of gaining an understanding of many complex factors that might effect a biological parent's struggle. This understanding helps her to work with the parents of the children she and Nate care for, and build relationships with them. For example, her understanding of, "how addiction works, how that plays out in behaviors, and that it's an illness," allows Karri to partner with the parent and support the best outcomes for the child in her care. She points out that, "in most of these families, they have trauma of their own, and if nothing else, they have the trauma of this child being taken away." She acknowledges that, usually, there are other major factors at play. "A lot of times, the parent you'll be working with will be the victim of numerous issues themselves, such as poverty or trauma." Karri says that her understanding of the impact of poverty, as well as equity issues, for example, helps to make it easier for her to work with families. She says it is important to acknowledge that most of these parents are doing the best that they can and deserve the benefit of the doubt, even though they are not parenting the way you would want them to parent, perhaps. "But they're showing up, they're trying, they're doing the best that they can with very little support. All of the treatments, the supports, the court costs, the lawyers – they're not always set up for success, so I give parents credit that they're trying to undo lifelong trauma that they've endured, as well as lifelong poverty and the effects of that."

Karri points out that mental health is an issue. Even while receiving training to become a foster parent, she recalls hearing things like, "What's wrong with them?" or, "How could they do that?"

"There are extreme cases, but most of these families are doing what they know,

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doing what they've learned, doing what's normal in their social group, and they don't know other ways of parenting." As a foster parent, she feels it is imperative to acknowledge that, "we all come from different life experiences."

Karri and Nate work hard to maintain a positive relationship with biological families, while setting healthy boundaries. Karri sees this as a benefit to the children, "so when they do go home, we can still stay in touch and stay a part of their lives."

Karri says that "even if it's very challenging to work with the parent, you have to [do it] for the best interest of the kids." If you have an ongoing relationship with the family after the child is reunited, you can continue to encourage the parent to follow through with the services and supports the child needs, and be an ongoing cheerleader for their success.

There are many ways to foster this positive relationship from the get-go and beyond. Karri hesitates to invite biological parents to their home for the initial meeting, but over time, she tends to first invite them over along with the social worker and gradually open up from there, depending on the case. She suggests showing the parent the child's room if they visit your home and giving them a snapshot of what their child's life looks like during this time. Karri also suggests that, if you're planning a visit to the zoo or the pumpkin patch, invite the parent to join you. Particularly around holidays, Karri values being inclusive of the parent for everyone's benefit. "Invite them to trick-or-treat together." She stresses the importance of doing all this while being mindful of setting and maintaining healthy boundaries.

Flexibility vs. Structure

One of the challenges of parenting children with special emotional needs is providing the structure and routine they benefit from while maintaining flexibility. "We can take a new placement with an hour's notice and they can also leave within an hour's notice. So there has to be a lot of change, requiring a foster parent to be very flexible."

Karri reminds us that kids come with an emotional suitcase and it's a foster parent's role to help them unpack it. While other families may be able to stray from

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Resources

Tip Sheets

Under the Microscope: Maltreatment Allegations

wiadopt.org/Resources/TipSheets/WhatDoIDoAbout/UndertheMicroscopeMaltreatmentAllegations/tabid/481/Default.aspx

Books

The Foster Parenting Toolbox, edited by Kim Phagan-Hansel

Additional Information

Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/fostercare/handbook>

Family Support Associations

wifostercareandadoption.org/Resources/Family-Support-Associations

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)

www.wfapa.org/

Handling False Allegations of Child Abuse and Neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway)

childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/allegations/

Allegations Happen: How to Prevent and Survive Them (North American Council on Adoptable Children)

nacac.org/adoptalk/allegations.html

CPS: Implications for Foster Parents (Fostering Perspectives)

fosteringperspectives.org/fp_vol7no1/implications.htm



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routine at times, Karri has found that that hasn't worked well with the children she and Nate have cared for. "Our kids have to go to bed at 7:30 or they won't function at all if their routine is off." She suggests communicating clear expectations, having a consistent schedule, and a lot of foreshadowing, to help children adjust to a routine and any changes.

Self-Care for Parents

Self-care is an area that Karri looks back on with hindsight and wishes she and Nate put more attention to from the beginning. One thing she would have done back then was to have used respite support. She

explained that they had the mentality that the children wouldn't be with them forever, so they didn't need date nights or time away; but now she realizes that that time away really is crucial. Parenting is a challenging venture and, in Karri and Nate's case, because of a high level of needs of the children in their care, they were rarely with the kids without the other adult. "It's hard on your relationship," Karri says. "It's tricky because you don't want to leave them with a stranger but we need to [take breaks] more often for ourselves and for our marriage."

Karri adds that, as a mother, she feels like it's harder for her to take a step back and let things go for her own wellbeing. "I think, if I'm not there, it's going to be harder for me in the end. I do think it's hard for women to step away from the family. We feel like we just 'do it right' or 'do it better' sometimes, and it's okay to walk away and do something for you and it all works out. The house may not be as picked up as I want it to be, but everyone is happy, fed, loved, and in bed. So I put that into perspective.

"Whatever it looks like for you, you have to take care of your own mental and emotional wellbeing. It may be exercise, being outside, a pedicure, a massage – anything that's for you."

Another way for a foster parent to care for themselves is by seeking the shared experience and support of other foster parents. "When I first started, I looked at a Facebook support group a lot. I read people's stories and situations. You find parents asking things like, 'Is this normal?' and others responding with reassurance and suggestions for what to do." If online social networking isn't your forte, you can ask your social worker if there are any parents in your area that you can talk with as resources.

Education

Karri has experienced a feeling of empowerment and a better ability to advocate for the children in her care if she takes the time to educate herself on the challenges the kids in her care face. "There's so much that you can read and learn about. Just expose yourself to as much of that info as you can." She suggests googling mental health diagnoses, such as Reactive Attachment Disorder. "We've seen attachment issues in almost all of the kids we've cared for. It's important to understand what it looks like. You might think, 'The baby never cries. It's so nice.' But that's not a good thing." If you understand that, you can communicate concerning behavior to therapists,

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teachers, and case workers. “Your social worker is also helpful.” The case worker can provide assurance, resources and background experience to help you better understand the needs of the children in your care.

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This is just a beginning to the tools you can arm yourself with as you navigate caring for children as a foster parent. Challenge yourself to reach out - to the Coalition, to a support group near you, to your social worker - for more ideas and perspectives. [Browse the tip sheets on our website](#) or check out a book from our online lending library to stock up on information and insights. We wish you well as you take each step forward in this journey. We're here as a resource along the way.

A special thank you to Karri Bartlett for sharing her thoughtful contributions for this issue of our newsletter.

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Part of taking care of yourself means making sure that you are meeting your basic needs: sleeping, eating, exercising. Talking to a therapist might be beneficial during this situation or seeking legal counsel from an attorney; every person and every situation is different. Ensuring you are taking care of yourself can help you better deal with this stressful situation with a clear head.

- After an allegation and investigation has occurred, it helps to debrief. Learn from the experience: *What could I have done differently? What might I do differently from here on out? How can I better take care of myself? How can I prevent something like this from happening again? How can I better protect myself and my family?* Learning your personal limits, and knowing that it is OK to say “No” when you are feeling overwhelmed and stressed, can prevent a situation from reoccurring. “After-care is very important,” Sherry and Tina agreed. “There is hope.”



Sherry and Tina shared that the experience of dealing with an allegation is similar to going through the stages of grief and loss; it is a process that can impact relationships with your worker, agency, a child, and other providers. Even when a situation is resolved, many people are left feeling as though their reputation is tarnished and they second guess themselves. It is important to remember that this is a temporary situation. It is a frightening experience, but there is hope and help.

Becoming a foster parent exposes oneself to a certain amount of risk, though it is a worthwhile risk helping to keep our children safe. Please see our additional resources for more information and support. And, remember, you can always call the Coalition for help—we are here for you!

Thank you to Sherry Benson and Tina Christopherson from WFAPA for contributing to this article.



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our wish:
a family to keep us **together.**

FosterParentsRock.org



our wish:
a family to keep us **safe.**

FosterParentsRock.org



Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)

WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. They also have an extensive website, wfapa.org, a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.

Contact Us!

Please know that we are always here for additional information, resources, and support.

You can contact us toll-free at

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