

# Kandles for Kids

KLA White Paper Project

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Brian Hartman, PNC Bank

Melinda Schwartz, Cardinal Services, Inc.



Imagine if you will having someone come into your home, declare it unsafe, and then order you to leave with only the clothes on your back. You are then taken to a home to live with strangers. The home smells different and the everyday rules and routines are different, the food is different, **everything** is different. What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Now image this happening to you when you are only eight years old and just entering the third grade.

The average age of a child entering foster care is eight years old. In Kosciusko County the number one reason a child is removed from their home is related to meth use. Unfortunately this means that the children are not able to take anything with them as they leave their home. In the United States nearly 500,000 children are in the foster care system. In Indiana that number exceeds 9,200 children. While it is encouraging that as a society we take steps to protect these children and give them the best opportunity to succeed, regrettably there is a general lack of awareness about how foster care works and a lack of volunteers who can facilitate the needs of these children.

In Indiana every county has a department to handle displaced children. According to Erin Shidler, the local Director for the Department of Children Services for Kosciusko County (DCS), there are currently 21 homes providing care to 83 children in the foster care system. Of the 83 children served by DCS, 25 are currently placed in foster care homes. Two children from Kosciusko County are placed in homes outside of the county. Fifty-eight children are placed in kinship care; foster care provided by an extended family member. There is an overall shortage

of foster families, and a general bewilderment regarding what is expected of foster parents along with a true understanding of the risks versus the benefits of fostering.

One of the largest barriers to people getting involved with foster parenting is a lack of understanding of the needs and the myths that surround DCS and children in foster care. People often think of DCS or Children's Services as baby snatchers and fear spanking their children in public. The core function of child welfare is to protect and keep children safe from abuse and neglect. Ensuring a child's safety is the first priority, and every effort is made to make the natural home the safe place for the child to be. Removing a child from their home is the last step taken and only used when the home poses an immediate risk to the child(ren).

Common myths surrounding foster care include:

**Myth:** My own children may be hurt or exposed to danger if I have a foster child in my home.

**Fact:** Yes. The fact that kids who come into foster care have experienced trauma of some kind (through no fault of their own) or they wouldn't be in foster care, and yes, that trauma could manifest itself in unsavory and unwelcome ways. But on the other point, is the fact that your biological children will never be the same once they have been intricately involved in the family foster care mission. In fact, it will shape who they become.

**Myth:** The biological parents pose danger to me and my family.

**Fact:** The incidents of biological parents being a danger to a foster family are very few. Foster parents often serve a mentorship role to the biological families, and some of the most positive outcomes stem from foster families who allow visits to take place in their home (the foster family is the one to initiate this). They serve to build the birth parents' confidence and parenting skills and abilities.

**Myth:** I am afraid I would get too attached, and it would be too hard to see them leave.

**Fact:** It's true — you will get attached, and it will be painful when children you love leave. But these children have suffered through things no child should ever face, and they need the love and care foster parents provide when they open their hearts and homes. "When God calls you to do His work, He's going to make sure you're equipped to do it," says Samela Macon, foster care program director for Buckner Children and Family Services in Beaumont.

**Myth:** The kids will be returned to their family only to have a reoccurrence that leads them back into foster care.

**Fact:** While this can happen it is the exception, not the norm.

**Myth:** The process of being licensed and having foster children is really invasive.

**Fact:** Children who are placed in foster or kinship care have gone through trauma; even if it is “just” the trauma of entering foster care. It is vital that children do not leave one unsafe environment only to be placed in an environment that could potentially cause further trauma. Additionally, any training that parents are able to receive to assist them in being more knowledgeable is a positive.

Some of the challenges that foster families face are, on the surface smaller than those myths listed above, and some challenges are related to parenting a child you did not raise from the start of their life.

Time is a challenge most families know well. Time for a date night or going out with friends can be hard to find. Fitting in appointments, grocery shopping, doing laundry, and making meals can often be exhausting. Then when adding in maintaining the home; raking, cleaning, and so on there are often not enough hours in the day.

Another challenge: finances. Foster families receive a small daily stipend that is paid out on a monthly basis to help cover expenses. Depending on the needs of the child this stipend may range from \$10 a day to \$20 a day. This money is to be used for extra groceries, personal care items, clothing, school needs, diapers, gas money getting the children to doctors and therapists, and the list goes on.

Not everyone is meant to be a foster parent, but everyone is able to help. Mission Point Church in Warsaw is familiar with the needs mentioned above and has begun to respond to some of them. Mission Point Church currently offers assistance with a Foster Care closet that helps supply foster families with needed items due to last minute placements. These items include cribs, clothing, and travel bags. They also provide training which includes dinner and

reimbursed childcare. There is a team that provides meals, tutoring, and laundry services. The church also hosts service hours to assist with raking leaves and other household needs.

Another area in which support can be extended is in the area of birthday parties. Go back to the scene at the beginning, when you were imagining being removed from your home. Now imagine it is your birthday what is it that you may want? Most children want nothing more than to go home, or to know that they are not forgotten and are a part of something bigger or that they are more than “just a foster kid”.

Beyond the obvious cake: decorations, party favors and venues for parties are also a need. When foster parents and birth parents are able to celebrate a child’s birthday together it creates a positive environment for the child. The child realizes they do not have to choose between loyalty to their foster family or their biological family. The biological family increases their network of support for when the children return home when they have a positive relationship with the foster family. Having a neutral location in which to hold the party creates a natural environment for the biological family and the foster family to support and celebrate the child(ren).

We are proposing a group that will organize a “one stop shop” for birthday parties for children in foster care. This group would be the point of contact for foster parents when preparing for the child’s “big day”. The group would coordinate with local bakeries and grocery stores to donate cakes and possibly balloons. Party supply stores would be contacted for donations of party favors, paper products, and the like. Other retailers would provide a venue for the party for free or a reduced cost. Venues may include the skating rink, parks, and community buildings.

Every child is one caring adult away from success. Imagine if there was a group that could help support those who have opened their homes to children in need.

We leave you with a few foster children who had caring adults in their lives that have had a significant impact on the world we live in:



Whose life will you change?