

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF

HOPE

By Amanda Cruce, Tecoria Jones and Jennifer Rhodes

We don't often pair the words "child welfare" and "hope" together. From the time a family is in crisis, to the last visit with a caseworker, "hope" is often the last word that comes to mind. But for child welfare to meet any of its goals or purposes, hope is the only thing that is important. Hope can be the driving force as someone looks to make a change and build relationships. The need to sustain hope for the future, better connections and effective relationships are critical for healthy development in children and for growth of their families. The "why" and the "how" of building these relationships should always be done with one simple truth: Hope can positively impact every step in a family's journey. Below, several parents of children who entered the system, foster parents and others involved in foster care share their thoughts on the role hope played in their foster care experiences.

Tecoria Jones is a native of Columbia, South Carolina, and is a parent advocate. Jones' efforts in parent advocacy and family engagement is fueled by a dedication of purpose. Her lived experiences include time in foster, kinship and congregate care. Jones approaches her commitment to parents, family and communities with an understanding of trauma and the resilience of hope. Jones is a consultant, a trainer in Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Protective Factors Framework and a parent leader with the Children's Trust National Alliance's Birth Parent National Network and Birth & Foster Parent Partnership. Jones is a member of the Family Voices Parent Council working with South Carolina Department of Social Services workgroups. She is a mediator and restorative justice circle keeper.



As mother and head of household of a family that has encountered child welfare, I know the system can be a strength to communities and families. I also know that the system was formed to carry out tasks that are not strengthening.

This is a time of building. What is this action of building within the child welfare system? Positive social connections can help build bonds. These healthy relationships are happening with birth and resource foster parents.

Parenting is a skill. It takes time and effort to become good at it. In truth, being a good parent is relative to each child in each situation. Birth parents are people. Resource parents

are people. Together, these individual people have something very precious in common — the children for whom they care. When birth parents hit challenges and hardships, resource parents have the opportunity to provide mentoring, to be a support and connector.

Resource parents receive ongoing training and can be critical in their ability to stand alongside and be a guiding light as birth parents walk through the shadows toward a brighter future for themselves and their children. Building hope is possible, especially considering it is the children who are the adhesive in the building process. The children keep us connected. They deserve all the hope they can get. •



Jennifer Rhodes lives in Tennessee with her son and younger brother. She is a program coordinator for an organization that provides educational support to young adults transitioning out of foster care and varying backgrounds. She is a passionate advocate who has served in the Tennessee Supreme Court, advocated for legislative representation at the state and federal levels, while sharing her story in various platforms to bring awareness to the support needed to provide young adults a chance to create a brighter future. Rhodes is actively involved as a child welfare consultant to increase youth and family engagement in the practices within the child welfare system. Pictured above is Rhodes, her son, and brother on their first road trip to Colorado as a family.

From a child's perspective, entering the child welfare system is and always will be complicated. It shakes your very identity, and this is why communication is so important. I began to question what was safe, what was home, and it shifted my entire view of the world, which has a lifetime impact. Children should be met with hope and support. When adults model that in these complicated circumstances, it can create a space for a child to learn important life lessons and not lose the child-like innocence that involvement within the child welfare system challenges. A child questions hope in the adults around them in every moment they see negative communication and become unsure of what the future holds and experiences can have devastating effects on healthy brain development. So it is of utmost importance to ensure adults realize children are being conditioned either positively or negatively by every moment of the process.

I see the changes in communication and the emphasis placed on healthy relationships in my work in the child welfare system now. And it gives me a sense of hope that we are moving toward a future where all those involved in the system work as team. Nobody can ever replace the longing a child will have for human connection, no matter who they are longing for. A system that operates from a place of compassion, growth and hope can create a positive team for a child to create positive development versus conditioning a child to expect chaos and miscommunication. For birth parents, children and foster, kinship or adoptive families — everyone deserves to know they are supported, will be met with compassion and grow step-by-step to a hopeful future. Hope will always go hand in hand with humility and acknowledgment that no one is ever going to get things perfect — there is no such thing in human design. But when we see each other as partners in navigating the whirlwind of the child welfare system, we create an accessible path for children to walk into a world where they can be just that, a child truly loved.

There are some strategies that give hope, but relationships are complicated and none of this comes easy for anyone without a supportive community. The Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) is a nationwide group which has created recommendations and real-life scenarios to help support these relationships. This tool can help guide and support families in working together. But no tool is the end-all, be-all. The best advice is to get involved in a community that believes all voices and relationships matter and supports the connection with birth parents, foster parents and youth. Allow yourself the courage to engage with folks who will let you know if you are not giving the best chances of hope. These are the communities that will keep you sane, grounded and able to view even the most challenging moments with the perspective of positive connection and the guiding commitment to hope.

The Masai tribe in Africa had a traditional greeting "How are the children?" and to answer with a truthful, intentional, "The kids are all right," meaning that all is well. We must consider that any adversity faced is taking up space and hope is also vying for this developmental space. Hope looks like a child having all the people who love them be in their family. Hope looks like parents, including birth, resource, kin and fictive kin, seeking and accepting real, positive social connections. We know hope changes things for the better. Isn't that how we want our children, families and communities to be? •



Amanda Cruce and her wife Deena have been foster and adoptive parents for the last 10 years, working with Quality Parenting Initiative, Birth and Foster Parent Partnership and families in their local communities to reunify families and keep connection and relationship whenever possible. Cruce has worked in her state to enhance the child welfare system, improving the culture surrounding normalcy, foster parent engagement, birth parent involvement, and teen voice. Through this work, she was honored to speak at the "White House Convening on Developmentally Appropriate Services for Children, Youth, and Young Adults in Foster Care" and to subsequently work as a family consultant for the Capacity Building Center for States. Cruce is an active participant of the Family Consultant Team and has worked for family voice to be infused at all levels of the Center for States, the child welfare system, and in each state. She firmly believes that the system is not fully functional if not all voices are heard at the table. Cruce is president of FloridaFAPA, the state's foster and adoptive parent association.

As a foster parent, hope is sometimes hard to find. But I also know that being intentional with finding hope is the key. I also know I am the one who has to keep bringing it. As someone who came to this situation on purpose, I see it as my responsibility to keep hope alive and to balance relationships. This means something different in every relationship, which means that I have to remain flexible at all times. I love the families I have walked the walk with and my ability to give hope in my intentions, hope for the future and hope that I see the good in building relationships that work for everyone. We talk about this openly. My wife and I are vulnerable; we are real and authentic with the families we walk with. Sometimes that goes well, sometimes it doesn't, but I always hope that it does. We also have to balance the relationship with the child in our care. This is often a difficult balance and one that is hard to understand until you have done it. I have never read or attended a training that taught it well ... until it was happening to me. It is difficult to love a mom and dad and have a deep relationship with them, but a different one with deep love with their child for whom I am caring. The blended feelings of loss, love and triumph occur when a child leaves my home to go back home is beyond words. However, the ability to talk about it and be vulnerable also gives hope to the family, child and multiple foster parents who are watching and hoping that it will go well. •