



After Care — I wish my service plan had prepared me for reunification

May 2, 2018 by Sharkkarah Harrison

After spending four years in foster care, my 7-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter were trial discharged to me in time for Christmas 2015.

The family shelter I was in with my 9-month-old baby wasn't our idea of home, but my kids were happy just to be back with me and excited about their new brother.

It was the happiest day of our lives.

It was also the saddest, because a big part of our family was still missing—my oldest daughter, 9, didn't come home with her brother and sister.

She chose to be adopted by her foster mother.

ANGRY AT THE WORLD

My kids were placed in care because I used excessive corporal punishment. Back then, I was angry at the world— angry that I was broke and homeless and didn't have support because I too had grown up in foster care. I was so overwhelmed by my life that when my kids acted up, I disciplined them the only way I knew.

Then, during the case, my 9-year-old told her caseworker that she had been molested.

I'd also been molested as a child and I felt worthless because I'd failed to protect my daughter. It hurt so bad that I tried to commit suicide.



Once I got better and learned how to heal and help myself, I fought for my daughter and I fought to be able to attend counseling together.

I wanted to help her heal. I used the time to listen to her talk about her pain and how mad she was at me.

In the end, she chose not to come home.

MOURNING

My son and youngest daughter were very upset when they got home and I told them about their sister's decision. They looked up to her and after so much time in separate foster homes they couldn't wait to live with her again.

That first night together, we talked about how much their sister meant to us as tears flowed from our eyes. I let them go through their emotions until we all fell asleep in my bed.

I knew we had a lot to process as a family and that we needed to heal while putting our lives back together. A lot had happened to us in four years.

GROWING PAINS

While I was doing my services and trying to get the help that I knew I needed in order to get my kids back, they were growing up and dealing with their own challenges.

When my son went into care at 2, he had a speech impediment, but by the time he was 6, the agency had him diagnosed with ADHD and a learning disability. Later on, I found out that my youngest daughter also had ADHD.

They'd also both been abused in one of the five foster homes they were placed in. When I found out, I immediately had them removed, but the damage was done.

As my children grew, I saw their behavior change in ways that showed me they were in a lot of pain.

They would throw tantrums during visits and in the foster home. My son went from having a smile on his face to being quiet and withdrawn. My daughter, who once loved to get dressed up, no longer cared about her appearance.

UNPREPARED

I found a trauma-focused therapist who helped me to understand my kids' behavior. She told me that I should prepare myself for life with kids suffering from ADHD and trauma.

But I wish I'd understood exactly how prepared I needed to be. Now I know we could've used trauma-focused family therapy and individual therapy for each child. I wish that once my case reached trial discharge, those services were put in place to help us cope with life after foster care.

Instead, CPS ordered me to remain under supervision and continue the same services—therapy and psych— for a year.

TANTRUMS AND TEARS

The first few months back together as a family were great.

We spent all of our time together— we watched movies, played music and danced, colored and went to the park.

I was so happy that I spoiled my kids with toys, candy and fast food. But when I couldn't afford to give them those things anymore, they started to behave in ways that I wasn't prepared for. They cursed, fought, lied, broke things and stole.

They would kick and scream at me, and say that they hated me and that I sent them to foster care because I didn't want them. They said they didn't want to live with me and once they actually tried to leave the shelter.

At times, my children were so out of control that I would cancel appointments because they didn't want to leave the house. Their tantrums lasted up to an hour. If we were on the street or on the bus it would escalate.

It was so shocking and embarrassing that at times I would lash out and scream at them. But mostly I would just start sobbing with my baby strapped to my chest and say, "Lord, please help me." I loved my kids, but I hated not having control.

TREATMENT GAPS

I was also nervous because, as my case got closer to final discharge, my caseworker told me that the agency would no longer give me refills for my kids' ADHD medication. I had to switch them to my insurance and find a local mental health clinic.

I asked for a referral to a local mental health clinic but all my worker gave me was the information for my local emergency room.

Throughout my case, I had found my own services whenever I felt the agency's providers weren't helping me make progress. I also fought for my right to make educational and medical decisions for my kids while they were in foster care. So I knew what to do.

But this was the first time in four years that I'd had to deal with my kids 24 hours a day. Things got chaotic and the stress piled on. The hospital where I got their meds for a while refused to give me any more without my kids being seen by a therapist. Then there were waiting lists for services.

Meanwhile, because my kids were inconsistent with their therapy and medication, their behavior got worse.

My family felt as fragile as it had ever been.

LIVING IN FEAR

By the time we reached final discharge, I'd made some progress. I'd moved into my very first apartment and started working part-time at Rise.

It felt good to have a real home and a job but every day was a struggle.

My kids would act out in school. It got so bad that their school started calling me almost every day with a complaint. I'd have to leave work to go pick them up. Sometimes I wouldn't even be able to go to work because of their tantrums. One time, the school sent my son to the hospital because he was tearing up the classroom.

The school wasn't very understanding, even though they were aware of my kids' history. They put my son in Special Ed and wanted to leave him back a grade, which I fought to prevent. They said they couldn't control my daughter and tried to kick her out of the school. I also prevented that.

The more problems my kids had at school, the more I lived in fear that CPS would come back into our lives. I didn't want anyone to know about our challenges because I was afraid that CPS would say that I couldn't take care of my kids and remove them again.

Every time there was a knock on our door, the kids would get scared that it was a social worker coming to get them.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

When my children were in foster care, the system focused on making sure that I did the services that would address the issue that caused them to be removed—my anger. But the agency didn't seem concerned about how much my kids had changed while in care and how their traumatic experiences in foster care would affect us all once we were reunified.

I often think about how, when I was in a single women's shelter, the caseworker helped me create an emergency plan called an Independent Living Plan. It was similar to CPS' service plan but I defined my own individual needs and goals. I also made a plan for what to do and where to go when things got really hard and I needed help.

I wish CPS had helped me make a family reunification plan like that. I wish I'd had conferences where I was introduced to community resources, family service programs, support groups for parents with children returning from foster care and trauma-focused family counseling.

I only recently accepted that my children won't ever be the same as they were before foster care. When I think about the pain and fear I see in my kids' eyes every single day, it cuts deep into my heart.

HANDLE WITH LOVING CARE

My therapist once told me that I may never be able to take away my children's pain but that I could create new memories to replace the old ones. I could show them in many ways how much I love them and will be there to support them throughout their struggles.

I hope that with time and a lot of loving care we will be able to heal together as a family and strengthen our bond even more. I also hope that one day I will be able to say with confidence that we have healed from our trauma and are living life as a happy family.