



Strengthening Families & Communities

**REFLECTIONS ON FOSTER CARE, FAMILIES AND
DIVERSITY:
EXCERPTS FROM REMARKS BY ACTRESS AND
FORMER FOSTER CHILD VICTORIA ROWELL AT
CASEY FAMILY SERVICES FOSTER CARE 2000
CONFERENCE.**

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Reflections on Foster Care, Families and Diversity

Excerpts from remarks by actress and former foster child Victoria Rowell at Casey Family Services Foster Care 2000 Conference.

There's so much nebulousness in a foster child's life even in the best of care. In most circumstances, my foster care experience was exemplary. That being said, it wasn't until my early 20s that I was able to come to peace with it all. There's still a lot of shame for having been a foster child. There are a lot of things to sort out as a foster child.

When I was in my 20s, I felt really comfortable with being a foster child and realized that I needed to talk about it. I'm glad that I did, it seems to be helping some other kids.

I hope at least once in your experience as foster parents you have come into the company of a fine social worker, because it's like night and day. If you have concerns about your social workers, get in touch with the supervisor. It is up to you to do that.

Foster youth have to become involved. Get ignited about the issues. Call your social worker. Get your correspondence going with your social worker.

There is only so much your foster parent could do, especially if there are other children. So I say, encourage foster children to correspond; know their social worker's name; give them the telephone number. There's nothing like the child building synergy with that social worker.

I think that, wholeheartedly, you should support your foster children's relationships with their natural parents, when appropriate. In my case, our mother was unable to take care of us, but our foster mother encouraged us to correspond with her. My foster mother and my natural mother had a 25-year correspondence.

We were respectful of our natural mother but we felt really, really fortunate to be with this foster family. It would behoove you to not keep your foster children from these people. It actually shows how much better off they really are.

There's a big division between siblings in the course of placement but I believe you should try to acquire the numbers of the siblings. It gives the child a sense of peace, a sense of not feeling like this little ship in a big ocean.

Being a foster child, there's a stereotype attached that perhaps you're a troubled child. There are all these different perceptions about what a foster child is and that's why it's very important that we continue to educate the public.

The reason why I'm in Hollywood doing these shows is a direct result of my foster mother and all the other wonderful people who supported me. It would be impossible for me to be there and do the work that I do--to hold down the two jobs and raise my family-- without the structure that I have underneath it all.

I believe that the reason why I've been blessed this way with this work is to be a conduit, a voice for foster children. Whenever I can, I am always an advocate for foster care.

It's so important that you give foster children their own space--in a closet, the toothbrush holder, the dresser--it's got to be their space. They should not be made to feel that it is second-hand or temporary. Let them feel that it potentially could be a permanent situation.

One of the crazy things about foster care is the child knows this could be temporary so you want to give them a feeling of security, regardless of how brief, in any way that you can.

It seemed as though nothing was more important than family in their household. And although I'd been in positive family circumstances before, that particular foster family exemplified the strength of unity. Don't think that kids don't get that from your behavior, because they do--we do--a thousand times.

I think that women, men, we're all so very important in our children's lives. Whatever you can give does matter. You don't know what's going to spark a child. One of my foster mothers sold oodles and oodles of Avon and I was her delivery girl. I loved it because I got to go over there and have conversations with people.

Don't be afraid to expose your children to all of these ideas. You are helping them express themselves and helping them learn communication: the letters to the social workers, knowing the telephone numbers, encourage them to pick up the phone.

Give them chores where they have to communicate with people. Sometimes foster children become isolated. Even though they're among a lot of people they close up, withdraw. Because they're exposed to so much so quickly, they burn out from the experience of it all. So, be cognizant of that.

As a result of everything that my foster mother did, I was inspired to start The Rowell Foster Children's Positive Plan, which supports foster youth in fine arts, camps, and job opportunities. I thought it was very important to continue the lineage of the classical ballet, because that was always anchoring for me.

The Rowell Foster Children's Positive Plan is very involved with job opportunities for the emancipated kids because it's a little scary going out there, taking that step off.

We have one young man on *Diagnosis Murder* and I watched him go from getting up at 4:30 in the morning, by bus, and getting there on the set and being the last one to leave. It's been a beautiful genesis watching him stay with the job, and then get his own car. He's very inspired now to do greater things in his life as a result of that experience.

I always think that things are in our own backyards. If you have ideas for emancipated foster youth, don't be shy about it. I never imagined that just because I pitched the idea to Viacom that they would accept it. So even at your places of employment you might suggest such an idea, and you'd be surprised.

Our goal was not necessarily to have children with artistic promise, but that they would come out feeling better about themselves and have reassurance, and have the experience of ballet and learn a little bit of French, and hear a different kind of music and go on all of those wonderful excursions.

We began with about five children and then we continually grew. We started in Maine then went to Massachusetts and then California. We also include summer camps and we do a reunification camp for siblings who are separated.

We really believe in reunifying and reuniting the children because that's part of the trauma going on in their lives. They don't see these people that are part of who they are.

Foster siblings need to be a part of the process. I'm talking about all the children within the home. We try to get enough tickets donated or pay to send as many children that want to go in the household. And then the foster parents always want to go, so they kind of switch with the excursions that we do.

There is always going to be resentment among children in a family. It's very real, very natural and tough to get around. I think that counseling should be available to all foster children to air it out, because the resentment could become really strong.

You have to reinforce the child, tell him he is valuable. Let that child know he can turn his life around. I believe children can turn their lives around, but that requires a lot of patience, a lot of love and a really good social worker.

The easier road is to say, "I'm nothing. I want to die; you're not my real mother." But, given the right circumstances and the right tutelage, you can excel.

I understand this girl's resentment, especially if this is not her first home. She's tired. She probably feels like, I don't want to try anymore to acquiesce to a new environment.

Everyone's a little uncomfortable at first and this young lady might be tired of doing it. She's just tapped. You could just say, "Look, I know you're tapped. I bet you're

exhausted. This routine has really wiped you out. Let's start fresh. Let's talk about it. And let her just say those things herself. If you plant the seed there, she might be willing to express herself in an honest fashion, not in a way with such contempt.

I've seen foster children who are established in a household with new foster children coming in and an enormous amount of jealousy comes into play. "I'm here first, what are you doing here?" That happened in our household, and it really has to be monitored. The parents really have to get in there from the onset, and you must explain that we are all here for one purpose, and that is to receive love and to be raised together.

This bit of division, and I'm more superior than you because I'm here first, it's just based on being territorial, but it must be squashed. And equal respect has to be given to all the children in the household and favoritism must not be played, because children smell that and they act on it like an animal.

That was never my experience, but I do work with children that have been sexually offended and I marvel at their resilience. Sexual offenses and sexually offended children are a very big issue, and one that should not be taboo in these types of discussions. Any concerns that you have should be heard.

I'm older now, so I embrace the beauty of the quilt, so to speak. When you're younger it's very hard to accept a lot of diversity. It's hard to deal with all the families, all the smells, the different foods, the bed. So many things are different. It's just almost too much.

Again, counseling is very important. There are books out there on biracial issues, which I think are very important. Time is the best Band-Aid of all, and you can't push time. But I just have to believe that this girl knows that she's loved by you, that's got to be a great sense of security for her, even though she may be insecure with who she is, between her races.

In spite of my biracial background, I didn't think about it too much because it was in such a loving home. I didn't think about it until people brought it to my attention. But we got enough love and enough fortification in terms of self-assurance that it wasn't so bad; it was still difficult.

I'm not saying you have to run around beating a Bible. What I'm saying is, anything ... whatever it is that you do that shows some level of spiritualism. I found myself in crises once I was emancipated ... and even when I wasn't emancipated, just being away from this wonderful woman, I always prayed. However it was that I prayed, I prayed and hoped ... I had faith. Even if I didn't know a prayer, I knew I had faith, which has been a saving grace in my life. But having that faith, whatever it is for you that was such an anchor for me from when I was a child to today, it gave me an opportunity to always have a home, in having this interest.

So if a child has an interest--sports, or bugs, or a stamp collection--support that interest. Dancing gave me a sense of peace and it was what was mine that could not be taken away. I would be a much different person if I was not given that opportunity by Agatha, who trusted me at eight years old on that bus to go. It just gave me that outlet and it gave me a sense of exercising my differences. And it has always been a religious experience for me to be able to dance and be artistic.

Sometimes it's not easy to find out what a child really is passionate about. It's even more difficult when you're dealing with foster children, because they're less apt to open up and reveal that part of themselves. But try to find it, because it's definitely there.

Sometimes people say, 'What are you doing with those foster kids--taking them to ballet classes?' Well, no, it's actually something that they're going to be able to carry with them for the rest of their lives. It's a discipline that they take with them throughout their lives no matter what it is that they choose to do.

There are many facets to this stone. And we keep chipping away and we'll get that diamond in the rough nice and sparkly at some point, but there's a lot to be done.

Don't try to do too much. You've got to know when to stop, because you have to take care of yourselves too. You will be doing a disservice to children in taking them in if you're tapped. So do what you can do, don't feel pressured, because Casey wants you to do the best, give the best that you have.