

Foster children in S. Tahoe deserve stability in their lives

By Leila Rosner

More than 750,000 children are abused or neglected each year in the United States. At least 410,000 children live in foster care because their families are in crisis and cannot meet their day-to-day needs. In California, approximately 60,000 children are in the foster care system, 300 in El Dorado County, and approximately 100 foster children are from South Lake Tahoe.

These kids are from our local schools, from Bijou to the Magnet school, and our own neighborhoods, from Meyers to Stateline. They may take the bus to school with your children or play with them on the playground.

But here's where it gets messy. A foster child from South Lake Tahoe is more than likely not going to be placed in a foster home in Tahoe, but will instead go to Placerville, Sacramento, or Jackson. Why? Because the need exceeds the number of foster homes in South Lake Tahoe.



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Let's put this into perspective. Meet Bradley (name changed to protect privacy), who came into the foster care system at age

2. Bradley was an adorable boy with brown hair and green eyes, an outgoing personality and a melt-your-heart smile. The toddler rarely laughs, but when he does, his chuckle is contagious. Bradley, however, was born to a mother with mental health issues that caused her to act more like a child than a capable, caring adult. For example, when Bradley misbehaved he was slapped, pushed, or, worse, held upside down by his feet and his head shoved into the toilet. After he choked up the water he had swallowed and gasped for air, his mother would shake her head in disappointment, with a "look what you made me do" expression.

Stories of abuse and neglect like Bradley's unfortunately are not uncommon in South Lake Tahoe. Foster children may arguably be the most vulnerable of all human beings. They are completely dependent upon adults to provide for their needs. But when those caregivers mistreat, neglect, or cannot care for them, they are pulled from the only semblance of a family they have known. The only foundation, no matter how shaky, they have ever known.

Nationwide, foster children are meant to be placed in a family setting because this is where children thrive. They are also meant to stay in their school and even neighborhood if possible. Why? Because everything else is crumbling and changing around them. They deserve to wake up to a mom or dad, albeit, in a different family, and go to the same school the next day. They deserve to have their same friends. They deserve the consistency of having the same teacher.

This ideal is not, however, what many South Lake Tahoe foster children experience. If there is no available home in South Lake Tahoe, these kids are placed off the hill. They are completely uprooted from any and all routine, any and all familiarity. Not only do they have to get used to a new family, but they have to go to new city, a new school or day care, have a new teacher, and make new friends.

The life of a foster child is never easy, but it becomes even more difficult and confusing if that child has to start over in every aspect of life. This is called compounded trauma. Trauma on top of trauma. Being abused and neglected is traumatic. Being taken from your parents is traumatic, no matter how abusive or neglectful they were. But being placed in a different city is a trauma that doesn't need to happen and wouldn't happen if there were enough people willing to become foster parents in Tahoe.

The problem not only has an emotional impact, it can also make reunifying the child with the parents more difficult. Children deserve to have visits with their parents and siblings, but what happens if they are placed in Sacramento and there is a snowstorm that makes it difficult to drive over the pass? They don't get to see their parents that day. What happens when a child is in first grade and has twice weekly visits for two hours? If you do the math, that's actually a six hour day for the child. They have to be in a car for four hours just to see their parents for two.

Let's go back to Bradley's story. Bradley was lucky. When Bradley was taken from his mother and placed into foster care, he was fortunate to live in a local foster home. He was able to play outside in his neighborhood, on his own playground, with the same familiar faces. He was able to attend the same preschool with the same teacher – the same teacher who greets him with a big hug and smile as soon as he opens the door.

Because of his abuse and neglect, Bradley had some issues to work through. For example, he was terrified of the bathroom. He would start to cry as soon as he thought he had to go into a bathroom. Bradley also would not make eye contact with anyone. He was hiding. He was scared. And, he didn't trust adults.

Today, however, Bradley has been adopted into a loving family. The very same family who took him on that first day in foster

care. Bradley makes eye contact. He is no longer fearful of the bathroom. He is able to trust adults. In fact, observing Bradley, you would never know there was trauma in his background. Even though the family had no intentions of adopting, that little 2 year old won their hearts and will be a part of their family forever. Bradley is loved.

All of our children deserve a safe and stable home, whether in foster care or not. Maybe your own home could be this safe place.

In honor of Foster Care Month in May, would you consider making a difference in the life of a child?

Foster parents have monthly reimbursement for expenses ranging from \$609 to \$790 depending upon age. Foster children come with their own medical, dental, and vision insurance. Support services are available through 24 hour on-call social workers, transportation help, and training through Foster and Kinship Care Education at Lake Tahoe Community College.

To learn more about becoming a licensed foster parent or adoptive parent, please contact one of the following:

Foster Family Service – (530) 544.2111

Koininia Family Services – (530) 541.1870

El Dorado County Child Protective Services – (530) 573.3201.

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