Resource Exchange for Adoptable Children in Tennessee
Bringing Families Together Through Adoption
Family & Children's Service in Collaboration with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services

family connections

Fall 2005 Issue

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Adopting Teens in Tennessee

In recognition of November as National Adoption Month, our fall issue of Family Connections is focusing on a very special group of waiting children…teenagers! There are currently 247 children who are thirteen years of age and older in full guardianship and waiting for adoptive families in Tennessee. 176 of these children are fifteen years of age and older. 70 of the children are seventeen years of age and will soon "age out" of fostercare.

For many, the thought of parenting a teenager conjures up images of attitudes, hormones, dating, and driving - images that many find down right frightening! **However, for the following two families, parenting and adopting their teenage children turned out to be rewarding and well worth celebrating!** We spoke with Ginger Dennis and Ramona Saine about their experiences fostering, and later adopting, their teenage children. **We wanted to know their tips for foster/adoptive parents of teens, resources they utilized for services and support, and the best things about parenting teenagers.** Both Mrs. Dennis and Ms. Saine share their experiences with prospective resource parents through PATH training. Mrs. Dennis is a parent trainer for PATH and Ms. Saine has participated in PATH panels.

Ginger Dennis and her husband Dru have fostered for twelve years. During that time, they have adopted a set of twins and a teenage son. They adopted their son, Matthew, when he was thirteen years of age. The Dennis' first met Matthew when they were his house-parents for about one year. Matthew was later placed with a family outside of the state. Unfortunately, the placement did not work and Matthew returned to Tennessee. Mr. and Mrs. Dennis made the trip out of state to bring Matthew back. The Dennis family knew that Matthew needed an adoptive family. **They realized they had a strong bond with him, and decided that they would make the commitment to adopt Matthew.** After living in another placement for a few months, Matthew moved in with the Dennis family. Matthew's adoption was final six months later.

Ramona Saine is a single parent who adopted her daughter Rowronica when Rowronica was thirteen years old. Ms. Saine began fostering in 2002 and Rowronica was her very first foster child. The placement began as a foster placement because Rowronica, after experiencing the dissolution of an adoption due to crisis within the adoptive family, made it very clear that she did not want to discuss adoption when she moved in with Ms. Saine. Rowronica brought up the topic of adoption by Ms. Saine about five months into the placement.

Ms. Saine says she knew she wanted to adopt Rowronica "the first time I saw her."

When we asked Mrs. Dennis and Ms. Saine for tips for parents, they gave us quite a few. For starters, Mrs. Dennis advises families to allow the child time to adjust. She stresses that **parents should make opportunities for bonding with the child and make their commitment clear but should not force closeness in the relationship.** If the child rejects the parents' attempts, Mrs. Dennis encourages families to avoid taking it personally but rather to keep trying.

Both women advise families against expecting teens to do all of the changing. Parents need to acknowledge that their own lives are going to change when parenting a teenager and they need to accept their teenager for who he or she is. Although families can help teens learn new routines and new behaviors, Mrs. Dennis explains that families should refrain from pushing children too hard to change and become part of the family. In her experiences supporting other families, Mrs. Dennis has found that many families are frustrated because they want their children to blend in with them. Instead, she says, **"Parents should look at the strengths that the child has to bring to the family instead of asking the child to change to fit in with the family."** Ms. Saine echoes this suggestion. She does not expect to completely change her daughter but understands her role as a parent is to help Rowronica learn certain skills and behaviors in order to be successful. She adds that parents need to "pick their battles." Parents need to decide upon what is the most important issue and focus on addressing that issue first. Other things can come later. **Ms. Saine also advises parents to help teens see issues through the parents' perspective by taking the time to explain and answer questions.** This helps teens understand the reasons for certain rules, i.e. no dating until a certain age. In addition, just as parents have reasons behind the rules they establish, parents also need to realize that there are reasons behind many of the children's behaviors.

Ramona and Rowronica Saine

Mrs. Dennis encourages parents to go back and do a lot of nurturing with their teenage child as well as support their learning of independent living skills. She explains, **"Don't assume they know how to do it all at their age."** In other words, do not just assume that a fifteen year old is going to act as a fifteen year old or know how to do the things you think a fifteen year old should know how to do. In addition, by showing them how to clean up and how to groom themselves, for example, parents are able to engage in some alone time with their children and demonstrate to their children that they care about them. Although it might sound simple, Mrs. Dennis encourages parents to model an example for their children.

According to Ms. Saine, often teens just want to talk and "just want to be heard." Ms. Saine encourages parents to "listen." In her experience, children often tell parents things about themselves even when they do not say things outright. She adds, **"When you find an interest, help them get involved in that activity."** Mrs. Dennis agrees with the importance of identifying a child's strengths and states, "Examining the child's strengths and praising him or her for them will help the child to relax and bond with the family." Both Mrs. Dennis and Ms. Saine believe that parents should help teens become involved in activities, at school, at church, in the community, etc. Mrs. Dennis adds, "Families should encourage their children to be active but they should not force children to be involved." Parents should be involved as well. Mrs. Dennis encourages families to be involved in school activities with their children. She advises families to attend meetings at school and support their child's extracurricular activities.

Mrs. Dennis encourages resource families to **be flexible when parenting teenagers**. This is one of the characteristics of successful resource parents identified during PATH. A sense of humor and good communication skills are also paramount for families to possess. Ms. Saine advises families to be consistent with their rules. Particularly with teens, **parents need to keep consistent rules and routine**. As suggested earlier, parents also need to be prepared to explain why certain rules are in place.

Mrs. Dennis shares that support from her agency, the Department of Children's Services, and her church have been important for her family. For children with particular needs, using another trained family from the agency for child care is very helpful. Ms. Saine found support during the stressful times through her church, friends and family. Several foster/adoptive families attend Ms. Saine's church and her church family as a whole is very supportive. She relies on friends who she "totally trusts" when in need of childcare or a little rest and relaxation. By the term "total trust" she means friends who will keep the same house rules as hers and are consistent with the type of parenting that she provides. Ms. Saine also makes sure to stay aware of information available on the Internet, books, tapes, etc.

Mrs. Dennis reports that one of her family's biggest challenges was helping Matthew to understand that he did not have to leave their home. Matthew had experienced two failed attempts at adoption prior to placement with the Dennis family. As the Dennis' continued to foster other children, Matthew thought that he too might eventually leave the home. Mrs. Dennis explained that **Matthew's last step in bonding with the family was his knowing that he did not have to leave**. Rowronica expressed her fear and expectation that she would have to leave Ms. Saine's home by acting out in school. Rowronica eventually told Ms. Saine that she wanted to see how quickly Ms. Saine would have her removed from the home. Like Matthew, Rowronica had experienced failed placements in the past. She thought every adult would treat her the same way. Ms. Saine remembers that she was calm whenever she was called to the school for Rowronica's behavior and **as she gave Rowronica consequences at home, she remained committed to being Rowronica's mother**.

Many of the suggestions provided by Ms. Saine and Mrs. Dennis are found in PATH training. Although it can be difficult to keep in mind the characteristics of successful resource parents during the stressful times, many families are most likely already putting them into practice. As Ms. Saine states, **"It is really not as hard as most people think" to parent a teenager. She adds, "Everyone needs the validation of a family" - no matter his or her age**.

For additional reading, we suggest: National Adoption Information Clearinghouse http://naic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/f_adoles/index.cfm - "Parenting the Adopted Adolescent"

The article includes a bibliography for parents and adolescents.

THE FAMILY CONNECTIONS FAVORITE FIVE LIST:
THE FIVE BEST THINGS FAMILIES SAY ABOUT PARENTING/ADOPTING TEENS:

1. Enhancing children's lives by providing for them and teaching them about the things we take for granted.

2. Watching teenagers grow and become a part of your family while still maintaining connections with siblings and respecting birth family.

3. Parenting often brings out good things in the parent and helps the parent to grow and learn.

4. Fostering gives families the opportunity to meet a community need.

5. Encouraging children to be the best they can be and helping them to claim the positive aspects of their birth families and know that they do not have to make the same mistakes.

Miracles Waiting To Happen

Meet Najee - 5/21/89

Najee loves to play games on the computer, shop for model trucks, going out to eat and travelling. Najee loves anything to do with trucks and has a large collection of model trucks.

Najee's case manager and foster mother state that Najee responds to one on one attention. He is sensitive and yearns for unconditional love and affection.

Najee would benefit from a two-parent home with a structured environment where clear limits and boundaries are set and maintained.

For more information:

Ruth Teegarden
901-578-4242

Meet Robert - 6/9/88

Robert loves sports, especially football. He is athletic and enjoys being very active. He enjoys school and has plans to attend college after graduation.

Robert's case manager says, "He has the best grin and is instantly likeable. Robert is easy to talk with, and enjoys being part of a family."

Robert needs a structured environment that will allow him to remain involved with extracurricular activities and provide scholastic support.

For more information:

Tracy Borum
615-250-7222

Meet Molly - 8/23/91

Molly enjoys riding bikes and four wheelers. She also likes talking on the phone, listening to music, playing softball and video games. All in all, she prefers being outdoors.

Molly's counselor says that Molly is a joy to be around and can really brighten your day.

Molly needs to be in a stable environment that will provide nurturing and consistent supervision. She needs a family that will help her make positive life choices and one who will model positive and healthy relationships. Molly's family will need to commit to helping her achieve academic success.

For more information:

Suzanne Jones
931-525-6930

Meet Johnny - 4/24/91

Johnny has a charming and playful personality and is usually friendly, smiling, and talkative. He is restive and does not like to sit still. Johnny enjoys drawing and coloring.

Adults who work with Johnny say that he is a very loving, energetic, and curious young man who is happy-go-lucky.

Johnny needs a strong two-parent home, hopefully with an older brother, who can appreciate his gifts without being distracted by his charm. Johnny will bring lots of fun and enjoyment to those around him each and every day.

For more information:

Michelle Fussell
731-364-3149, Ext. 119

Help Us Find A Family

Meet Alyshia - 2/10/89 and Bernitha - 3/7/88

Alyshia loves to do hair, listen to music and draw. She appears to be a carefree young lady who enjoys making others laugh. Bernitha wants a family who will treat her with respect. She has good leadership skills and is a good role model for children. She likes to cook, write poetry, listen to music, play kickball and basketball.

These young ladies need a family who will love them unconditionally.

For more information:

Mary Scruggs
423-634-6136

Meet Allen - 8/5/93

Allen loves to swim. Basketball is his first choice of sports but he also likes biking. He enjoys school, especially math.

Allen's counselors say that he is very inquisitive, intelligent, loyal, a good helper, compassionate and loving.

Allen needs a family that can be consistent with boundaries and rules, and set realistic expectations.

For more information:

Juanita Gray
865-594-6110, Ext. 137

Meet Stephanie - 11/5/89

Stephanie likes listening to her radio, playing cards, drawing/coloring and riding her bike. She wants to be adopted by a family that will always be there for her and love her no matter what.

Stephanie's case manager says, "Stephanie is a very special child who has overcome a lot. She needs the stability and security of adoption.

Stephanie needs a family who can be patient and nurturing, and who has an organized routine. A two parent or single female parent is desired for Stephanie.

For more information:

Stephannie Williams
731-660-6778

Meet Jacinta - 3/12/90

Jacinta enjoys talking on the phone, reading, shopping, and writing poetry. She is well mannered and seeks approval of an adult. She longs to have a loving family to embrace her.

Jacinta gets along well with others and works well, especially with younger children. She speaks very well and carries herself maturely. She is very talented and her poetry is moving.

Jacinta needs a family that can provide her the love and attention she deserves. They will need to be patient and understanding of her need to make adjustments.

For more information:

Georgianna Hooker
615-253-3308

The Internet Savvy Youth

In this day and age, many of us turn to the Internet as our source for the latest information. From keeping up with the local news, to checking movie listings, to "surfing" around exploring whatever strikes our fancy at the time, we are able to find out just about everything on just about anything!

Information about foster care and adoption is seemingly limitless on the Internet. Just as there are websites to address the needs and concerns of resource parents and child welfare professionals, there are many websites addressing the questions and concerns of children and youth in foster care. **These websites provide foster youth with a cyber-place to connect with other foster youth about their unique issues.** The sites contain message boards, articles written for youth by youth, commentary by youth on movies, books, and music, and links to other relevant sites. The following is a short list of some of the websites ***Family Connections*** has explored for children and teens in foster care. **Internet safety for children and teens is paramount and these websites are positive tools for youth to use.** On these sites, message boards feature safety rules and are monitored by adults. We encourage you to share this list with the children in your home. Browse the sites with your children. Make sure you and your children are comfortable with the sites. Answer their questions and be open to talking about the issues addressed. Then let them loose!

Tennessee Youth Advisory Council
www.tnfosteryouth.org

This should be the first stop for teens in Tennessee. TYAC is a group of current and former foster youth in Nashville and middle Tennessee working to improve the lives of youth and the foster care system. The website is appropriate for youth statewide. It really empowers youth to ask questions and advocate for themselves in preparation for their future. Topics addressed include Know Your Rights, Get Educated and Options After 18. Relevant news articles are also featured. This site contains links to many websites, including the following:

Foster Club - The National Network for Youth in Foster Care
www.fosterclub.com

Foster Club features a long list of famous people who were foster children, achievement awards (for grades, playing sports, good deeds, etc), Life Book pages, and a Talk Back poll and forum. Youth are also able to read and offer their feedback on articles and stories about adoption, school, drugs, relationships, the system, and "Kids Like Me." The site answers questions including what is a GAL and who makes decisions about foster children and offers advice on to how to share feelings and concerns. Foster Club has a lot of fun activities but also addresses serious issues for youth in care.

Foster Club for Grownups
www.fosterclub.com/grownups

Foster Club does not forget the grownups, either. This site is for adults who care about foster children (former foster children, foster parents, case managers, etc). The site features message boards, links to relevant news articles, links to free on-line training, and recommended reading.

foster youth involved, informed and independent
www.fyi3.com

fyi3 is similar to Foster Club but with more of an "edge" for the teens. fyi3.com is a partnership web project between FosterClub.com and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. It provides foster youth over the age of 14 opportunities to become involved, informed and independent in

their transitioning journey towards adulthood. The site features a Talk Back Poll and a forum for teens to offer their feedback on various topics and, like FosterClub, encourages members to apply for achievement awards. The site provides links to Youth Advisory Boards (i.e. TYAC) and encourages teens to advocate for themselves and others. fyi3 provides answers to teenagers' questions and posts links to relevant news and legislation, information about scholarships and various resources, as well as success stories featuring former foster children.

Adoption Clubhouse (a creation of the National Adoption Center)
www.adoptionclubhouse.org

This website is very child friendly and addresses adoption of all kinds (infant, international, foster care). Like many of the other websites, there is a message board for children to express their feelings about adoption. The "Adoption Talk" section includes an adoption glossary, suggested answers for nosey questions about adoption, and tips for asking adoptive parents about adoption. The Clubhouse Library recommends books (organized by child's age) and movies about adoption. "Homework Help" features information about the history of adoption and great advice for completing the school projects that are often difficult for adopted children, i.e. the Family Tree. The website also includes jokes and puzzles for fun. There is a section for parents, as well.

Casey Family Services
www.caseyfamilyservices.org

This site features sections for parents, youth and professionals.
Find the direct link to the section for youth:
www.caseyfamilyservices.org/youth_index.html
This website features many different types of profiles and stories about foster/adopted children. Links to articles from the Casey Family Services magazine *Voice* are also included. This site might be a bit too "article heavy" for some youth but others might find it quite interesting.

Represent/Youth Communication
www.youthcomm.org
www.youthcomm.org/Publications/FCYU.htm

Youth Communication's mission is to help "teenagers develop their skills in reading, writing, thinking, and reflection, so they can acquire the information they need to make thoughtful choices about their lives." Articles are written for the 13-19 year old audience. Youth Communications publishes two magazines, *New Youth Connections* and *Represent*. *Represent* was founded in 1993 under the name *Foster Care Youth United*, and is the only national magazine written by and for teens in care. Youth Communications has anthologized many of the articles from the two magazines and the website contains more information about these books. "Teacher Resources" includes article-related activity guides for adults (i.e. teachers, case managers) to use with teens.

10 REALLY GREAT REASONS TO ADOPT A TEEN From the Teen Point of View

1. **No formula, diapers, bottles, or burp rags required.**
2. We sleep through the night...even if our parents won't.
3. **We will be ready to move out sooner...but we will always come home to visit.**
4. We can program your cell phones & VCRs and teach you how to run your computer!
5. **We will keep you up to date with the latest fashions and trends.**
6. Once we get our permits, we can drive you to places.
7. **You don't just get a child, you get a friend.**
8. We can pick up after ourselves and do our own laundry.
9. **We will teach you how to be more patient, understanding, kind and empathetic.**
10. We all need someone to share our life dreams, achievements and holidays with.

The concept of the "Top 10 Reasons to Adopt a Teen" was developed by the Oklahoma Youth Advisory Board - 2000. This updated version of the list was modified with the help of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services "Caring for Kids" Campaign and You Gotta Believe's staff and youth.
For more information about You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption and Permanency Movement, Inc., visit www.yougottabelieve.org

conference corner

The Tennessee Foster and Adoptive Care Association (TFACA) held its 2005 state conference on September 30 - October 2 in Franklin, TN. This year's theme was "The Family Focus: Our Time, Their Future". The conference provided participants the chance to earn up to 15 hours of traning and thus, meet the annual training requirement. Workshop selections included courses required for newly approved DCS resource parents as well as elective workshops on various topics.

On October 13, 2005, the University of Tennessee in Knoxville hosted the Fall Conference on Foster Care, Kinship Care and Adoption.

Conferences provide a great opportunity for resource parents to gather together to learn, network and even have a little fun. Attendees often find that their motivation and inspiration is renewed after spending time with other and learning new information.

For information on events and upcoming regional conferences, Be sure to contact your Resource Parent Support Unit (RPSU) and check out the TFACA website (www.tfaca.org). The TFACA website also includes information on the Foster Parent Bill of Rights, links to informative websites, and *The Fosterer* newsletter.

Please note that we would love to hear feedback from you at any time. If you have an adoption story or related topic that you would like to submit for publication, please contact Scarlett Miles at 800-807-3228 or via email, scarlett.miles@*state.tn.us*. If you would like to discontinue receiving the newsletter, please contact Scarlett Miles via email or telephone.

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