

It Started With a Yes

Licensing Day! Two words that filled me with both anxiety and excitement. Nine years ago, I was a newly licensed single foster parent with a heart for special needs kids and an empty home. My first few placements were typically healthy foster children. I enjoyed having them stay with me, but my long-term desire to help medically fragile children kept nagging at me. When Homefinders contacted me about a toddler with HIV for whom they could not find a home, I knew I had to say yes to this one. Next, I was given an infant going through alcohol withdrawal who had feeding problems and severe acid reflux. As my experience and confidence grew, the state continued to send me medically complex children with bigger and more complicated issues. I finally found my niche and knew that this was what I was meant to do.

I discovered that since each child's medical needs are different, a child's caregiver, regardless of their medical experience, needed to participate in hands-on, child specific medical training provided by the child's health care professionals. I fully embraced the truth that "You don't have to know everything, you just have to be willing to learn" and I use this and my own example to encourage other families who have a desire to work with special needs children, but don't have any experience.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of caring for many children, but one that especially touched my heart was a little 8 month old baby named Lily who had suffered a traumatic brain injury at birth. Her young parents tried to care for her, but after months of trying to manage her extensive medical needs, they needed help and Lily entered the foster care system. In addition to her basic daily care, Lily required many therapies and doctor appointments, all which took a toll on not only me, but my daughter as well. Lily's brain injury often caused her to be up vomiting during the night and there were mornings that I woke up and thought to myself, "I just can't do this anymore". But then I would walk into Lily's room in the morning and she would smile at me with her whole body and I would be overwhelmed with thankfulness that I had the privilege of caring for this sweet little one.

When Lily became available for adoption, I was strongly attached to her, but I knew that I would not be the very best permanent option for her. Instead, my close friends, Andee and Josh, not only fell in love with my angel baby, but they also embraced her biological family. Where some would have seen a wheelchair-bound child who has nothing to offer the world, they saw a beautiful girl who embodied joy, and biological parents who need encouragement and peace of mind knowing their child was in the very best place possible. I am blessed to be able to remain in Lily's life as her "Auntie" and watch her grow and flourish in her forever home.

Typically, the children I have cared for stay with me about a year. While the state is committed to reunification, the reality is that many medically complex children do not find their way back home. The parents really love their children, but they are usually overwhelmed and lack the support system necessary to successfully parent a child with many needs. I have had great experiences with the bio parents of my foster children and I have often been able to help mentor them in providing care for their child. For the few who have successfully returned home, I have also been able to be a support system for the family which allows me to remain a part of the child's life.

Anyone who has worked with special needs children will not deny that it is hard work, but we will all agree that the rewards you get from it make it all worthwhile. The bond that is formed between a caregiver and a child whose life is dependent upon you is a very special and strong, and it fills you with a sense of awe knowing that you are such a huge part of their life. If you have ever thought about opening up your home to a medically fragile child, let me encourage you in that you don't have to have a nursing or medical background, you just have to have a big heart and be willing to learn how to meet the specific needs of each child.

If you are considering providing care to special needs children, please visit our [Medically Fragile recruitment page](#) of our website for additional information and to learn about resources available to caregivers and the special children they care for.

For more inspirational stories or to find out more about becoming a foster parent, visit www.fosteringtogether.org.