



Changing the Life Course for Youth in Foster Care

It was loud but silent all in one moment. The man that hit our car also helped to get us children out of the car. He cradled me in his arms. He looked me in the eyes, blood streaming down my face.

“Sweetie are you okay?”

My thoughts were “Who is this man? Did we survive? Where’s my mom?” I soon learned that my mom ran away to avoid a DUI. Shortly after, I cried and clawed at the window as I watched my mom being handcuffed and arrested.

Paula entered the foster care system for the first time at age six, after surviving a car accident for which her mother was found at fault. After two years in various foster homes, often without her siblings, Paula was able to return home to her mother. Unfortunately, home still wasn't safe for Paula. With an alcoholic parent, she had to take the place of caregiver for her young siblings. Many unsafe men abused her and exposed her to drugs.

Over the next eight years, Paula moved repeatedly between her mother's house and foster homes, where she didn't feel safe or loved. The child welfare system had failed her.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls traumatic events that occur during childhood, like those Paula experienced, “Adverse Childhood Experiences,” or ACEs. ACEs include all forms of abuse or neglect, including violence, familial mental health or substance use problems, and parental divorce.

Traumatic experiences early in life can affect development of the brain and body, including the pleasure and reward center of the brain, which can lead to substance dependence. It can also hinder the development of the prefrontal cortex, affecting impulse control and executive function, and the amygdala, which is critical to fear response. (Ssebastian, 2021)



Every Child Has Value

Letter from Suzan Huntington, President & CEO

Dear Friends,

I'm delighted to share the stories of our work at Boys & Girls Aid. In my role, I've had the privilege of witnessing families blossom through adoption, and I've seen young children and teenagers find their forever families. This newsletter will take you through the trials and triumphs on the path to permanency, and I extend my heartfelt gratitude for your support.

Since 1885, Boys & Girls Aid has dedicated itself to the well-being and success of children. At our core, our efforts revolve around permanency. Permanency is the discovery, creation, and reinforcement of lifelong connections. We firmly believe that these connections hold the power to make a profound impact on the lives of children as they learn and grow, providing them with a constant source of care and guidance throughout their journey. We recognize the immeasurable value of these connections.

As an adoptee, I can personally appreciate that my life could have taken a very different path had I remained in foster care. I am acutely aware that the opportunities I had were a direct result of having caring adults who were invested in my future. Children who miss out on having a stable and caring adult in their lives face limited opportunities, and at Boys & Girls Aid, we are dedicated to ensuring their futures are strong and full of possibility.

You've heard me say before, "Every child has value!" This is irrespective of the traumas they may have faced in the past. We are resolute in our conviction that the ideal family is out there, ready to provide these children with the love and care they require. Our fall newsletter sheds light on "Adverse Childhood Experiences," traumatic events that occur during childhood, and how these experiences can affect the development of the brain and body. By recognizing and addressing past traumas, by meeting them where they are, we can help children regain trust and take a chance on a brighter future. And, as you'll read from one of our clients, "I am strong and resilient and all it took was having caring, committed adults in my life." This is what it's all about.

By the end of this newsletter, I hope you will take pride in the incredible work being done at Boys & Girls Aid. I also hope you'll join me in the Give Thanks Challenge! It is an honor to continue offering innovative services to ensure that children have the support they require when they need it most. Your dedication is essential, and we couldn't embark on this journey without your connection. Thank you!

Suzan Huntington, Ed.D.
President & CEO

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

▶ Traumatic events that occur during childhood.

Individuals who suffer from these changes in brain chemistry are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, like smoking and consuming alcohol. However, even those who don't participate in high-risk behaviors may still suffer from health issues caused by toxic stress, which weakens the heart and circulatory system, raises glucose levels, and wears out the adrenal glands, leading to problems with the immune system (Ssebastian, 2021).

Youth who have a high ACE score are more likely to suffer from depression, asthma, strokes, heart disease, cancer, and other health conditions as adults. They are less likely to be employed, graduate high school, or have health insurance (Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) 2021).

At Boys & Girls Aid, we recognize that every child in the foster care system has experienced at least one ACE. We aim to provide a safe home where they can work through their trauma without being exposed to additional ACEs.

This starts with our programming, designed to care for youth and help them reach goals specific to their needs. We operate through a lens of trauma-informed care and utilize collaborative problem solving, concepts in which all staff and foster parents are trained. Boys & Girls Aid takes pride in its strong training department, which is committed to keeping our staff and foster parents well-informed about the most current youth care practices.

Foster parents at Boys & Girls Aid undergo a comprehensive certification and training process to ensure that not only are they committed to the children they care for but that they have the tools to support a youth's needs successfully. Our foster parents undergo training during their initial certification, annual recertification, and monthly sessions dedicated to foster parent education.

Foster parents work closely with Boys & Girls Aid staff, who provide youth with counseling, skills training, and programming specific to their background and circumstances. We also have staff on-call, available to foster parents 24/7 to answer questions, provide guidance, and assist with emergencies.

At age 16, Paula re-entered the foster care system and urged her social worker to find her a family that cared. The social worker found Boys & Girls Aid and a foster parent named Rita.

"While I was in her care, I went to a dark place, I cut myself constantly. I locked myself away, but she always came knocking," Paula said. "She took time with me, stroked my hair, listened, rubbed my back, let me cry. It was the motherly love I so longed for that she gave me."

Paula was also connected with a counselor at Boys & Girls Aid who was devoted to her success, someone she still talks to frequently.

"She's my superwoman and all the support I needed to find my confidence, my inner peace, to feel the real love that I needed," Paula said.

Now, as an adult, Paula is thriving. She's happily married and has a fitness career that she loves. She describes herself as healthy, strong-minded, and loving.

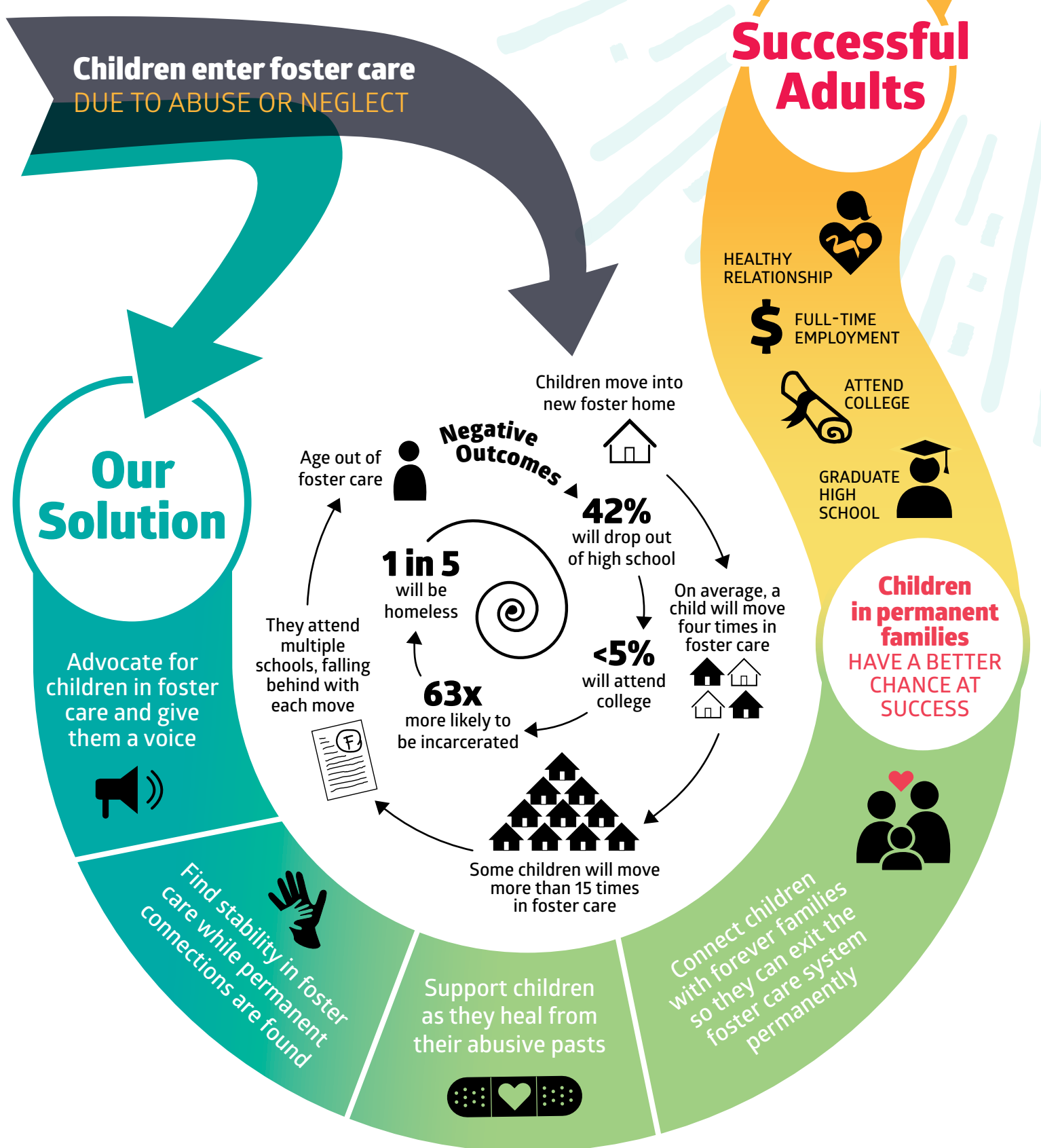
"I am strong and resilient and all it took was having caring, committed adults in my life. Adults who chose to care and make a difference to ensure children in foster care could find their lifelong connections," Paula said. 🌱

For sources, visit the Stories page on our website. Photos and names have been changed for privacy.



"I am strong and resilient and all it took was to have caring, committed adults in my life."

Improving futures for YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE



Join the Give Thanks Challenge! Help us raise \$10,000!

This November, Boys & Girls Aid is challenging our supporters to share what they're most thankful for, and help raise funds for youth living in foster care.

To get started:

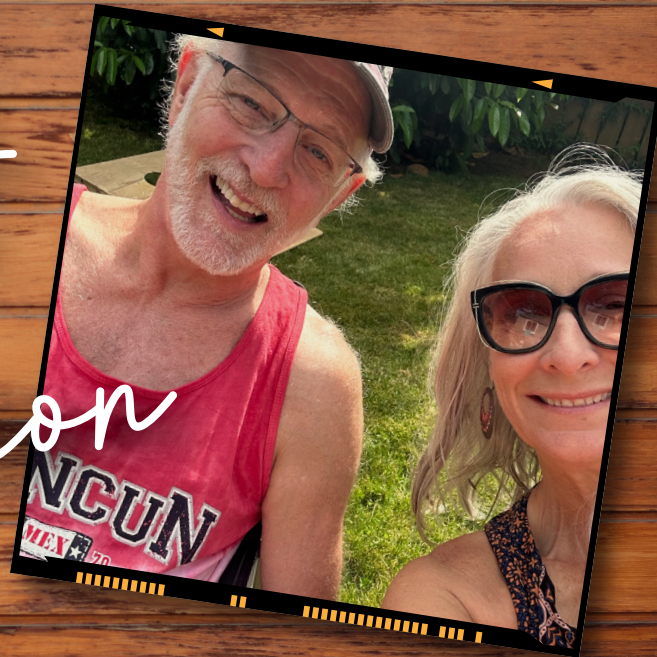
1. Visit boysandgirlsaid.org/give-thanks-challenge or access the QR code.
2. Create your individual or team page.
3. Share with your network, friends and family.

► **Join in the Challenge now for chances to win prizes. Sign up today!**

Scan here to sign up!



A Moment of Mission



Heather and Bill Dowell came to Boys & Girls Aid seven years ago as experienced foster parents. At that point, they had been fostering for 17 years and had even adopted two sons from foster care.

When the Dowells first began as foster parents, they did not know what to expect. They wanted to give kids a fun, adventurous, loving home where their needs were met and their voices were heard.

This seemingly simple objective became a starting point for developing a permanent connection with the children they care for.

"Our goal is to help them heal from past trauma and show progress emotionally, behaviorally, and academically. As they stabilize and settle into our home and family, we have seen each one of the children grow and find coping skills as they heal," Heather said.

The bonds that the Dowells develop during this process have proven to be lasting. They are still in contact with many of the youth they have fostered in the past, providing respite for their parents, or keeping up with them through phone calls and visits.

"It has been very rewarding to remain in contact with as many of our former foster children as possible even after they are adopted or reunited with their biological family. We want the children who live with us to understand we support who they are and their families," Heather said.

Recently, the Dowells took one of their former foster care placements with his brother and sister to the carnival for a day.

"He ran up to both of us with a big smile and was so excited to see us," Heather said.

The children enjoyed cotton candy, snow cones, and ice cream. They earned tickets playing games and cashed them in for fun prizes. Heather said she experienced strong emotions upon seeing her former foster son again, and that she feels a strong bond between them.

Support from Boys & Girls Aid is instrumental to the Dowells' foster care work.

"Boys & Girls Aid staff are always available to help us with questions and help us set up school registration and appointments. They support us in our work with each child, helping us meet their individual needs. We also enjoy the camaraderie of getting to know the other foster families and encouraging one another, and sometimes providing respite for one another," Heather said.

Heather recognizes that many are hesitant to become foster parents because they are worried about the grief they will experience when the child leaves their home. But as she and Bill have proven, that goodbye is not always for forever.

"Yes, you will feel grief," Heather said, "but the love and stability that you bring to their story, and perhaps a lifelong friendship, makes it all worth it!" 🌱



▶ The Dowells adopted their sons G'Mele and Johnny from foster care.



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