What’s it Like to be a Foster Kid?

Can you imagine what it is like to be a child in a foster home? Even though it may be the best option for the child at the time, the one place any child wants to be, to feel safe, and nurtured and loved, is home.

Our foster team tells us most kids land in foster care with only the clothes on their backs. They leave behind everything that is familiar to them. And life becomes very confusing. The child asks “What happened? Why am I here? How long will I stay?” Everything and everyone around them is suspect…”Is someone going to take me away from here too?” There is grief, happiness, anger…they may feel safe and happy with their foster family and then enormous guilt for feeling that way. Trying to focus in school is impossible…it can be hard to sleep and eat. And, many ask, “Why aren’t my parents doing what they need to do to get me back? What is taking so long”?

When we think about our own kids or grandkids…can we imagine how they would react if they were taken away to a new home with no understanding of what happens next? It is traumatic.

continued on page 3
A Message From Our CEO

Dear Friends,

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• The many legislators and elected officials on a local, state and national level who truly understand that the health of our community is directly tied to the health of our nation.
• For the incredible gifts and people, starting with Cole and Jeannie Davis, who made the Cole & Jeannie Davis Family Center at Casa de los Niños a reality.
• And to our individual donors who make a personal commitment to steadfastly support our work and to help thousands of kids and families live healthier and happier lives.

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Wishing you a Happy and Healthy New Year!

Sincerely,

Susie Huhn, MA
Chief Executive Officer

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If you are interested in making a gift to support the Family Center please contact Lisa Webster at 520.624.5600 x10302 or lisaw@casadelosninos.org.

Did You Know?

ONE IN NINE CHILDREN in Arizona has a parent who is in prison, on parole or probation.

Approximately

176,000 CHILDREN in Arizona have a parent serving time.

Children in Tucson with a mother in prison MUST TRAVEL TO WEST PHOENIX TO VISIT and maintain a connection with their mother.

Having an incarcerated parent is now recognized as an “ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE” (ACE), distinguished from other ACE’s by the unique combination of trauma, shame and stigma.

Focus on Families:
A Community Conversation

with Piper Kerman BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEMORIST • SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE

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For more information contact Amanda Mendoza at 520.624.5600 x10507 or amendoza@casadelosninos.org

Qualifying Foster Care Organization Tax Credit

Single Taxpayers

$500 maximum

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Many thanks to the Tucson Electric Power - Community Impact Grant Program for supporting the Crisis Shelter Volunteer Respite Program, that provides a safe place for children while families work through a crisis such as homelessness or domestic violence.

Our Parents As Teachers in-home visiting program recently received funding from Fry’s Food & Drug Stores. This remarkable gift will help many parents with young children learn skills to become their child’s first and best teacher!

The Spirit of Giving Impacts Casa de los Niños during the holidays and throughout the year in many different ways. This year we will help more than 8,000 children and 4,000 families, and we could not do it without your support. Here are just a few of the generous groups who are helping:

BA SIS TUCSON NORTH SCHOOL is supporting our foster families with a week of giving. Each day during that week they will be collecting items like baby bottles, fire extinguishers and school supplies to help our foster parents meet certification requirements, and be ready to welcome a child into their homes at a moment’s notice.

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Help “Pack the Covered Wagon” for Casa de los Niños at Trail Dust Town (6541 E. Tanque Verde). Now through December 23rd they are collecting:

• New pajamas, up to size 16
• Hygiene items: baby shampoo, soap, baby wipes, toothpaste, etc.
• New shoes, especially smaller sizes

On Friday, December 23rd at 9am, come celebrate with The Festival of Giving! Meet Santa, enjoy rides, and finish your Christmas shopping with the best local goods at Heirloom Farmer’s Market! 10am-3 The Grove will broadcast “Grove Mornings with Kristal Pine” live from Trail Dust Town from 7 to 10am. We may even have snow!

Please drop off a new, unwrapped toy at any Christie’s Appliance Co. in Tucson, now until Christmas.

With a donation to Casa de los Niños you can get a MY 92.9 commemorative Christmas tree ornament for your tree.

100% of the proceeds come to support the children and families at Casa de los Niños. Go to my929iheart.com to find locations where the ornaments are available.

Volunteer Profile

Thanks to Officer Sean Travers, the children staying in our shelter are enjoying some positive time with police officers in our community, because of a volunteer program he started with his fellow officers. Officer Travers believes that having officers from the Tucson Police Department volunteer with the kids in our shelter benefits them in many ways. ‘The kids will have a good role model’, he says, ‘and for some of the kids, their last interaction with TPD officers was when they were removed from their parents, so I want to show the children that police officers aren’t really bad guys, and try to promote positive future interactions with the police.”

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Officer Sean says that all the children he has met have had an impact on him. On Halloween, “one boy made sure to save a piece of candy especially for me,” he remembers, “and then there was the day I arrived, and the children were playing outside, and they all picked flowers to give me. They are all amazing, special kids, and spending the time with them makes my day better every time. Every staff member and volunteer deserves huge gratitude for what they do, and the difference they make in the lives of these children.”

For more information about becoming a volunteer, contact Maricela Fait, Volunteer Resource Manager, at 520.624.5600 x10501, or mfa@casadoldoninos.org.
The mission of Casa de los Niños is to promote child well-being and family stability in our community.
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We asked our foster team what it is like for the foster family:

Exciting, wonderful, a big responsibility, rewarding. These are some of the words foster parents use to describe the experience. But there are layers and layers of challenges and questions. They ask “How many kids are coming into my home? Who are they? What is their story? Will they be ok? Can I help them?”

Foster families are driven to help kids in need, and to provide a warm and nurturing home. But, the challenges are inescapable. They live in a fishbowl. Every inch of their house is scrutinized. Is it clean enough? Do I have all of the proper child safety requirements? How many fire extinguishers and smoke detectors do I need? I am evaluated, judged, and held to sometimes impossible standards. “I try to love a child unconditionally who is filled with anger, mistrust, outbursts, and who I know will be taken away.” Foster parents are often obligated to do things – as directed by courts or Department of Child Safety – that they truly believe are not in the best interest of the child they have come to know and love. And, they are frequently not consulted for input or feedback on decisions made for the child. Burnout for foster parents is high.

So what can we do to help?

The Foster Care System is Outdated

Foster children are entering the foster care system in increasing numbers across the country. We have seen similar increases in Arizona over the last 6 years. At the same time we have fewer foster families who can meet their needs. Why is it so hard to retain foster families? It is a terribly challenging system and situation for these families! The commitment is rigorous, the expectations high, and the obstacles are constant. The families frequently feel unsupported and unheard. The foster child is scared, uprooted, angry, unsettled, and most often, a victim of some kind of trauma. The foster family is expected to create a warm, nurturing home for this traumatized kid while navigating a terribly complex system. They are expected to attend all case hearings for the child, schedule appointments with doctors, support education plans, therapy sessions, visits with biological parents, and through it all, provide opportunities for the child’s “personal growth” – like music lessons and sports. This can quickly become unmanageable for families, and very often they simply burnout. The foster care system is outdated. If we don’t make some changes, we will never have enough foster homes to care for these kids.

Being a foster parent is a full-time job. We need to change the way we recruit, pay and treat foster families. Jim Kenny, a retired psychologist and advocate for transforming the foster care system, supports the idea of paying foster parents a salary - compensation equivalent to a second family income. The current foster care system pays everyone involved in the child’s case except the foster family. And they are the people who bear the heaviest burden of responsibility for the child.

Not only will paying foster parents a salary improve recruitment and retention, it will also ensure high-quality care for the child. Involving the foster care provider as an integral part of the treatment team, rather than as an outsider, could likely save money in the long run by reducing the time in the foster care system.

A great step toward a solution would be to fund research-based pilot projects to compare the current system (basically a volunteer system) with a system of professional foster families who are recruited, hired and trained to be part of the child welfare team. Transforming the way we do things will not happen overnight. It will take political commitment and a willingness to change. The benefits could easily outweigh the challenges by reducing costs for recruitment and reducing length of time in foster care. This is definitely an idea worthy of serious consideration.
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Photo courtesy of Girl Scouts of Southern Arizona
Beyond Bars program that brings girls and their
incarcerated mother together to build/preserve
relationships, reduce the trauma mom and daughter
suffer from the separation and foster leadership
development in both mom and daughter. For more
information, visit GirlScoutsSoAZ.org
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Rafael Torrez passed away in March of this year at the age of 6. He was the first child to a young mom who joined our Nurse-Family Partnership program before he was born. ROBERT TORREZ, Rafael’s dad, and his family now honor his memory by helping throughout the year with donations of new shoes, new clothing and he plans to bring a large donation to “Packin the Covered Wagon” at Trail Dust Town this month.

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ACCREDITED BY:

The Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services

PUBLISHED BY:
The Development & Community Relations Department:

LISA WEBSTER, Director

KRYSAL ALONIS, Development Coordinator

DAN GREGORY, Community Relations Coordinator

Better Futures is the official publication of Casa de los Niños, a non-profit, nonsectarian agency.