

A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a colorful striped shirt and a rainbow headband, smiling in a garden. The background is filled with green foliage and pink flowers.

By Richard Villasana
Founder, Forever Homes for Foster Kids

How Children Get Trapped in Foster Care and Three Easy Ways You Can Help Them

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Forever Homes for Foster Kids
9450 Mira Mesa Blvd, Suite C520
San Diego, CA 92126

www.ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org
info@ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org

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FOSTER CARE: THE REALITIES FOR CHILDREN ENTERING THE SYSTEM

Veronica is 15 years old. She's your typical teenager (if there such a thing). She's presently living with her father. She's thinking about her senior year, boys, homecoming, and boys. Boom! Her whole world just changed because her dad was busted for dealing drugs. He'll be in prison for 10 years so Veronica is now in foster care.



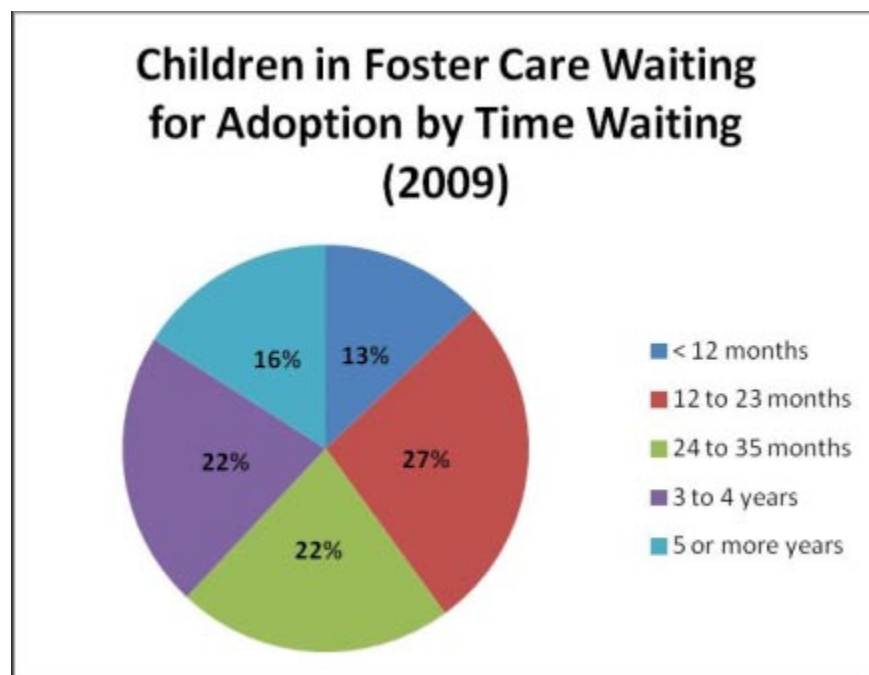
At 15 years old, there is almost no chance that Veronica will be adopted. In her state on her 18th birthday, Veronica will be put out on the street, alone and with no support and no family.

Once on the street, she has a high chance of becoming homeless, turning to drugs or prostitute, getting raped, or ending up in prison all before her 20th birthday unless something happens to change her future now!

"No matter how a child comes into foster care, it's important to know - these children are victims."

There are 400,000 children in U.S. foster care. Although this number has gone up and down over the years, even now that total has stayed sadly consistent. Nearly 18% of children come into foster care because of some form of abuse: physical, emotional and/or sexual. The remaining percentage of children enter foster care because of some form of neglect.

Of those 400,000 children, about half will return to their parent or guardian leaving 200,000 foster children. The average time that a foster child spends in the system is 2.7 years.



Annie E. Casey Foundation

However, nearly 16% or 64,000 foster youths will spend five or more years in the foster care system. Statistics show that teenagers who enter foster care will most likely spent their life moving from one foster home to another before, just like Veronica, before being forced out at either 18 or 21 into the streets with little or no financial resources or connections to family members.

LOCATING THE CHILD'S FAMILY

When a child enters foster care, state agencies are required by federal law to perform “family finding,” a social service’s term for locating and notifying a foster child’s relatives. Social services will look for those family members willing to be a part of the child’s life, care for him or her temporarily or, if necessary, become a guardian and give the child a permanent home.

“Eight year report finds that ‘almost 25 percent [of foster children] had been homeless since exiting foster care.’”

The family finding process to locate U.S. relatives of foster children has been refined to where it achieves a success rate of about 80%. Kevin Campbell, Director of the Seneca Center in San Francisco, California, is the architect and leading expert on family finding practices in the U.S. On April 23, 2013, he stated before the Senate Finance Committee that he was able to go online and in 10 minutes find 62 relatives for Antwone Fisher, a former foster child turned Hollywood producer.



This little girl entered foster care at four years old. Over the next 11 years she was moved to 45 different foster homes.

That's a new home with strangers every three months.

Let's face it, with Google, Bing and other search engines and easy access to personal information online, you can practically find out what your family and friends had for breakfast.

However, there are cases where Child Protective Services (CPS) needs additional help and expertise to locate family members of a foster child. The majority of these cases involve relatives such as a grandparent or other adult family members, possibly even a birth parent, who are beyond the reach of search engines.

"Almost 33% of foster children, some under two years old, will be physically or sexually abused while in foster care."

INADEQUATE FAMILY FINDING

In addition, the Departments of Human Services in certain states have inadequate procedures in place to locate these children's relatives. There are still many counties that do not have any formal family finding program. Many state agencies have contracted out their family finding activity to non-profit organizations. Despite the good intentions of these agencies, Campbell has voiced serious concerns about the nationwide lack of due diligence exerted on behalf of these children.

During interviews, several family finding specialists and supervisors have commented about struggling and "hitting a wall" when it comes to locating certain relatives. Foster children may not be old enough to know the address or phone number for other adult relatives. Parents who could offer more information about their relatives may choose not to do so because they are angry at having their children taken away. Other times, a parent may be too embarrassed to have their family members know that a young niece, nephew or grandchild is alone in a government institution.



"For a young enough child, it [being removed from their home] can be an experience akin to a kidnapping. Children feel they must have done something terribly wrong for which they are being punished."

No matter the reasons, children may spend years without contact with family members. Presently, a young teenager in foster care may have a birth mother or grandmother who has no idea their little girl is in a government facility.

Along with many other foster children, this girl may suffer emotionally while in foster care. The President of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, Martin Guggenheim, wrote,



“The end result is that this young teenager is now separated from her family and very likely to remain in a facility alone for years simply because states and their non-profit partners are not able to effectively locate her family members.”

“Nearly 24,000 foster kids will be forced out into the streets, alone and without family support, this year.”

JUDGES CAN BE A CHILD'S BEST ADVOCATE

Over the last five years, some judges have begun to demand that agencies exert more effort to locate relatives. Without this attention, many more children would suffer years of isolation from their families.

The case that my organization handled involved a foster child under the care of a county agency on the East Coast. The only time the social worker would take quick action on our requests for documents and information was when he was scheduled to go before the family court judge who demanded updates showing progress.

Without the pressure the judge placed on this social worker, it's very likely that the case would have dragged on for more than a year. Instead the case was closed within a few months, the child was adopted by a loving family, and the county saved thousands of dollars in foster care costs.



"Foster Youths are at greater risk for unplanned pregnancies, joblessness, homelessness, incarceration and early deaths."

THE WAYS WE HELP FOSTER CHILDREN

Someone asked why we focus on foster children. The simple answer is that foster care agencies have about an 80% success rate locating a foster kid's relatives in the U.S. That is a pretty high success rate. This means, however, that these agencies do not find any relatives 20% of the time.

If no family members are found who could be likely candidates to either be involved with or take in a child, then that foster kid may spend years in foster care. Even though adoption is a possibility, the courts generally do not want to move ahead with this option if both parents have not been notified. So again, a foster child may spend several years in the foster care system until they age out.

By finding relatives, the wheels can start to move a foster child out of the system and into a permanent home. So let's say an aunt is located. That aunt could have contact information on other family members. Don't think it happens? You'd be wrong because that is exactly what happened with this case.

In another case, the foster care agency knew that the child had an uncle living in Illinois, but the case worker had been unable to find him. The agency gave us the case, and within weeks we had located a couple of distant elderly relatives.

When the case worker telephoned, the uncle who lives in Illinois just happened to be visiting these same relatives when the case worker's call came in. Now the foster child is being processed to go live with his uncle and two cousins.

Did our work help a U.S. foster child? Absolutely it helped. Did it help the foster care system? Again absolutely it helped because when foster youth are placed with relatives, the foster care system pays on average \$4,500 per year to the family members caring for the child. How much do these agencies pay out in support when one child is placed in a group home? A recent study concluded more than \$100,000 per year per child.

Clearly not all of that money goes to the group home. Instead a large percentage goes to support the dozens of offices and staff that are in place to oversee the foster youth in group homes. What's more, when children are placed with relatives, several studies reveal that those kids do better in school. They are healthier and happier. Taxpayers win because instead of \$100,000 being spent on one child, twenty-two foster children are being supported. And how many offices are involved when children are placed with relatives? Two.



"Foster children who are 12 years old and older have less than a 1% chance of getting adopted meaning most will be forced out onto the streets when they turn 18."

FAMILY FINDING: A COST-EFFECTIVE SOLUTION

Fortunately, there are simple and cost-effective solutions that can put foster children in contact with their family members and start the process to move them out of foster care. Specialized family finding services exist at a fraction of the cost presently incurred by states to keep children in foster care.

Funding continues to be a problem for agencies needing to conduct effective family finding. The sad part is that there are big payoffs for locating these relatives. Kern County's California Permanency for Youth Project stated in a 2008 report:

"Over \$200,000 a month could be saved if only 37 youth were placed, resulting in millions in annual savings. The calculations provide solid cost justification for permanency programs, aside from the immeasurable benefits that come from providing youth with homes."

Yet until more funding can be earmarked for efforts to locate family members, foster children are at risk of staying in institutions or being adopted while their family members remain out of the picture. More often, these children will just sit in foster care until they age out and are on the street.



"New report reveals that for each foster child who ages out of the system, they will need about \$300,000 in social services over their lifetime"

THREE EASY WAYS YOU CAN HELP FOSTER CHILDREN

Here are three simple but powerful ways you can help a foster child right now.



1. **Help inform others. Use your social media.** Go to www.facebook.com/familyfindingmx and like our page. Then comment on our posts and most important, share our posts with your family and friends. Let them know you care about these children and want to share insights about foster kids.

Most people have no idea what it's like to be a foster child. Getting people interested in helping foster children starts with knowing more about these kids and what they go through, moving from one foster home to another, being bullied and abused. You can help people better understand the problems so they, too, will be motivated to help.



2. **Donate 25 cents a day.** You can be part of the solution. You can help offset the cost of a case to find a foster child's relatives. This means you can help ensure a foster child finishes high school and goes to college, giving them a chance to pursue their dreams and goals. If you feel strongly about children being our future, then this is a simple, practical way to help. Donate to Forever Homes for Foster Kids by going to www.ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org/donate.



3. **Volunteer.** You can become a CASA, a Court Appointed Special Advocate. You can also contact Child Protective Services (CPS) in your county. Or for as little as 1 hour a week, help us with our work to reunite foster children with their relatives.



If you have ever wanted to help a foster child, any of these three ways will work because no matter what you do, these children need you.

"Foster children who are united with their family members generally do better at school, graduate and attend college at a much higher rate than kids who remain in foster care."

WHAT FOREVER HOMES FOR FOSTER KIDS HAS DONE

We have an 85% success rate in locating family members of foster children. The agency caring for Veronica brought her case to us. They wanted us to locate her mother or other adult relatives. In less than four weeks, we put the agency in touch with Veronica's grandmother.

Finding Veronica's grandmother was a very important break in the case. The agency had heard from Veronica that she had aunts living somewhere in California, but Veronica hadn't had any details or addresses. Veronica's grandmother knew about the two aunts and that they were living in Pasadena, California.



Because of our success, Veronica has gone from a very likely future of being on the streets and homeless, alone and with no family, to living with her aunts, being back with her family, and having a chance to get to know her grandmother, cousins and other relatives.

Because of the support of caring people, our organization has helped move dozens of foster children out of the foster care system and into forever homes with family members or adoptive parents.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

If you have children or young nieces and nephews, be grateful they are growing up knowing who their family is and living among people who love them. Their present is stable and safe, while their future is open and full of opportunities.

Then do one more thing: think about the tens of thousands of foster children who have no control over their lives. They're separated from their parents and families and probably traumatized by their surroundings. Instead of spending time living and loving with their families, these children are alone. No child deserves that.

But you can be a hero to a child by helping to educate the public and raise awareness about the needs of foster children. You can donate and know that your contribution will allow us to get one more case that moved a child out of the system before they were abused forced out into the streets alone. You can be a volunteer for other organizations or work with us to help us to raise funds so we never have to turn away a foster child case because of the cost.

Together, we can create the awareness and actions necessary to help connect all foster children with their families so they have a chance at a brighter, healthier and happier future.

Regards,

Richard Villasana

Founder, Forever Homes for Foster Kids

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Villasana, Founder of Forever Homes for Foster Kids, is a leading international expert on reuniting foster children with their families.

Richard is a published author and international speaker. A monthly columnist for Foster Focus Magazine, Richard has been profiled in newspapers in the U.S. (San Diego Business Journal, Arizona Daily Star) and Spain and online about his expertise in locating family members. He has been interviewed on radio and by EFE, the world's largest Spanish media company. He is the founder of Forever Homes for Foster Kids. For more than 20 years, the organization has been building stronger families and communities by locating relatives of foster children so they can move out of foster care into forever homes.



Richard says, "While I was working internationally in Mexico, I learned I had a real talent for finding key government officials in Mexico for U.S. and foreign clients. Then some associates started to ask me to find their relatives: a brother, cousin, or an aunt. It was so exciting when I found someone's missing sister or birth father. The emails of thanks made my week."

He is one of the world's leading authorities on Mexican family history, business and cultural practices. He spent 20 years living and working in Mexico. He was a university professor at UABC, Tijuana, B.C. and has given presentations at some of Mexico's largest institutions and corporations such as Plantronics and

ThermalFisher. He was also a translator for the United Nations Mexican delegate.

Richard is an international trainer who has spoken at corporate, association, and university events (National University, University of Houston) in both the U.S. and Mexico. Email us at info@ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org for information about having Richard give a training or presentation to your group. All proceeds go toward handling cases so more U.S. foster children can move out of the foster care system and into forever homes with caring relatives.