

I am Katherine Dunn from Great Falls, MT. My husband and I have the privilege and challenge of raising our two oldest grandchildren who are twin boys aged sixteen and a half. The boys' mother lives in Seattle, Washington. The boys have lived with us continually since August, 2005. They used to just visit for a month in the summer until 6th grade. Then their mother said she wanted them to have a middle school experience because she had enjoyed attending school in the Great Falls Public Schools.

The boys returned to Seattle for the summer after 6th grade and were there for the first 2/3 of their 7th grade year. They returned to Great Falls and participated in 7th grade at a parochial school and they continued to play spring league soccer in Great Falls. After 7th grade they returned to Seattle. At the end of the summer of 2005 I went to Seattle, and the boys and their entire family drove back to Great Falls. That was the last time the boys have seen their half-siblings. The boys have stayed with us ever since.

In September of 2006 we did meet their mother in Coeur d' Alene, Idaho. One of the boys had struggled with some decisions which I felt we needed to have his mother's input and decision. Since then we have learned that if either of the boys were to return to Seattle to live with their mother, even though their ex-stepfather is out of the picture or so we think, that they would be put in a foster home rather than be with their mother or half-siblings. We did secure guardianship of both boys this past summer.

Struggles for the boys have included not seeing their half-siblings and not hearing from their mother over the last two years more than once or twice a year. Other struggles for the boys have included the fact that their mother was home schooling them so she could keep food on the table by delivering phone books and so all the children could be with her since the step-father would not babysit any of them. The boys delivered phone books on evenings, weekends, and almost all the days. Schooling consisted of listening to audio tapes in the car as they drove around the Seattle area and even to Portland and into Idaho. Needless to say they did not receive an adequate education which still haunts them as high school students.

Thus my husband and I have provided the basics of food, clothing and shelter PLUS opportunities to play soccer and other recreational sports, 4-H club activities locally, regionally, State 4-H Congress and including a 4-H exchange with another county in Virginia. We have made sure that the boys have had the opportunity to participate with us in church and youth activities within the church setting. We have been there when they melted down as early adolescent boys and they missed their mother and half-siblings. We have played games with them, taken them to the gym, scolded them when they didn't meet a curfew, and even eaten their cooking. We have been there when they cried, laughed, and cussed. I know I have won both the "coolest grandma award" AND the "meanest grandma award."

Professionally I spent over 36 years as a classroom teacher in five states and in an overseas DOD school so I am aware of the dynamics of children in many diverse environments. The most poignant cases I dealt with were the children whose parents would leave them periodically with the grandparents and then just out of the blue come to pick them up and take them back to another state. I listened to those students cry about not being able to make or keep friends or have a stable activity with the same coach while knowing they wouldn't be able to continue that activity in their new location. I watched them struggle academically, socially and especially emotionally. I spent five years as a school counselor and I recognize the angst the children displayed.

Within the last several weeks I had the opportunity to attend a workshop about the challenges an adoptive parent faces. Even though adoption and grandparents raising grandchildren are separate issues there are many similar behaviors which I recognize in my two grandsons' behaviors and adoptive children's behaviors. It comes down to just as significant of a challenge as adoption in the raising of kinship placement children. All of Montana's children deserve the opportunity to have a stable home life and consistent continuous parenting. I have challenged myself to understand the poignancy of abandonment and attachment issues which affect adopted children as well as kinship placement children. At one point in my career I taught Positive Parenting Classes for Family Court Services. As a current substitute teacher I also can identify students facing the lack of attachment to a parent by just observing their behavior in the classroom whether he or she is a kindergartener, a 6th grader or a high school student.

The grandparents and other supportive kinship placement relatives are saving Montana money with their support of kinship youth versus foster care placement. The children's perception and understanding of the world, their world, is colored by their short term experiences and understandings within their own lifetime. Some of those experiences are not ideal, but sometimes reality is NOT nice.

I know that even though my grandsons miss their mother that they are better off with us in a consistent setting where there is food on the table every meal and they don't have to worry about being verbally put down or physically neglected or not being educated. My hope is that the next year and a half until they turn eighteen will be sufficient to help them to continue to develop into productive adults.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Katherine Dunn
406-781-8606
kathydunn@att.net