

~~My name is Romy Bentle, my husband Eric Bentle is sorry to have not been able to be here, however he is at home with our 4 foster children and 2 birth children, we do have 1 more birth child but she is away at college.~~

We have been foster parents in Missoula County for 4 years and are licensed for 0-18 years of age. Since starting foster care, we have cared for 22 children in crises. We started strictly, as foster parents and have since become concurrent placement for the children in our home should it become possible to adopt.

First, let me start by telling you about the resources out there for foster parents

Family support specialist at DCFS

Monthly training meetings and a support group for MSFAPA

The children's therapists / N.S.

The children's social workers and occasionally the workers supervisors

Other foster / adoptive parents

Books and videos

Follow the child

Most importantly, I want to tell you my children and families stories. When I refer to my family and my children, I am referring to our foster and birth children. When children are placed in our home, they become part of the rest of our lives they are woven into the fabric of our family. When we first take them in, we love them as if they were ours to begin with. There are both happy and sad times; all too often, they are sad.

I will start with our first placement 3 kid's ages 10, 14, and 17.

Removed because of a meth lab in the home.

The 10 yo is placed with birth family. 17 yo was returned to his adoptive grandparents in WY. The 16 yo is with us. ~~MSFAPA~~

She has been in care for 3.5 years in this time she did live with birth mom for 4 months mom started using meth, & marijuana, again, harbored and married an escaped felon and the kids were removed yet again. The birth parents have been incarcerated twice and in pre release twice since the initial placement of the kids. They have obviously been unavailable to care for the kids.

During the 4 mo. time she lived with mom we had open communication and had the kids come visit 2 days a week.

After this last time of being removed 16 yo wrote a letter to the judge asking that her moms rights be terminated so that she could go on with her own life and be a normal kid. She also requested not to see or have contact with birth mom it is too painful. The judge ordered a visit. 16 yo was so upset she could not sleep or eat. She ended up in our bedroom for the night crying and shaking there was no sleeping that night. She went to school the next day which was also the day the visit was to take place she could not maintain in school and had to come home. Her therapist and guardian adlitem ended up canceling the visit. This particular incident caused her to feel unsafe, hopeless, and not cared about in the system. She is still dealing with the knowledge that her mom's needs were more important to the court than her own and her mom can manipulate the judge with tears that are not real. She can not understand how a visit could have been ordered

because her mom is the very same person that neglected her, made her parent her younger sister, exposed her to pornography, witch craft, a meth lab, left her in the care of child molesters, harbored and married an escaped felon. This is after all the same person who caused her to be in foster care. The very people she had trusted to keep her safe and happy had let her down, we are the ones to pick up the pieces and hold her when she can't hold herself up. Birth mom has requested to relinquish her rights, and the case could have been done, however her attorney talked her out of it. This child is a straight A student, articulate, intelligent, and has written a letter to the court stating all of the reasons she should never have to have contact with her mom. Her case is still going, she has not been allowed to achieve the permanency she desires and deserves. She is a victim all over again unable to move on with her life because the court system has not allowed that.

Moving on to another placement 10 yo girl. She lived in the shelter for 1 yr 5 mo before coming to our home. She lived with us for 1 yr 11 mo.

When she had been with us for appx. 1 mo we thought she might have learning disabilities. She was not transferred out of her school. We asked the school to test and have a team meeting. The school did not feel anything was wrong and did not feel testing was necessary. They felt it was because of her personal life. We continued to advocate for her, even after it was plainly aware that they would not do anything. This particular school did not value our opinions as foster parents.

She attended the school in our district the next year and after the first week her teacher came to me and asked if they could do some testing, they thought she might have some learning difficulties, she ended up having some along with a mild form of asburgers. If the school she was in had valued our observations as parents she would have not had to live with the frustration of trying to learn things that were above her level of comprehension.

She moved on to her birth father and step mothers home which she had never lived in. If the many attorneys in this case had not kept stalling or refusing to come to meetings she may have been able to go live with her birth father sooner.

A 11 y.o. girl placed because parents are arrested for attempted murder and other charges. They tried to kill the man who had molested her, she watched this all happen. Needless to say she came in shock, suffered from PTSD, and anxiety. Their family had been transients living in storage areas or under the stars until moving to Missoula. Her grandparents wanted her to move to Texas to be with them. The judge in this case was anxious to have the kids placed with family and became impatient waiting for the home study to be completed, he ordered DCFS to pay to fly the girls to their home in the next week. They complied, the girls lived there for appx. 1-3 months MT received the home study and it was revealed that in the home they were living in was a family member who was a convicted sex offender, and another member who had been arrested 2 times for armed robbery. The state had to pay to fly the girls back

We have had an 6 yo girl placed from another town who was RAD. The plan was to reunite her with her birth mom who lived in the pre release center. When she came she told of her aunt and uncle molesting her. Her uncle making her walk on shattered light

bulbs. Being beaten all over her body, locked in the room for long periods of time. Her bedroom had feces and urine all over the floor and walls. She slept on the floor of her bedroom on a mattress. We had to remove all sharp objects shoe laces and anything else she could find to hurt herself when first placed with us. She tried to break her leg, punched herself, bit herself, pinched herself, pulled her own hair and banged her own head. Her case went smoothly in court. We enjoyed her birth family and court seemed to be a breeze. Her mom did all of the things she needed to do to get her daughter back and is still 1 year later doing well. We continue contact weekly with her and her mother. She presents a challenge to her mother because mom has had no training for parenting a RAD child. Her mother still calls and asks what to do for consequences for bad behavior. This is a case that the parent made too much money to receive Medicaid for her child and they had to forgo counseling. I believe they would be doing better if there were a safety net for these situations.

ACT We have a case with a 4 and 5 year old both kids are RAD. The 5 yo has been moved into a shelter for the safety of him and others. They both appear to be sexualized. The 4 y.o. has brain damage, developmental delays, sensory integration disorder and speech delays from the immense neglect and abuse he has experienced. This is another child who needed cognitive testing done, he appeared to be autistic or aspergers. His parents took months to sign the papers to allow him to be tested. He now has OT x2/wk and speech x2/wk and needs 3 more days added to his schedule. He also sees a psychologist, psychiatrist and therapist. During a visit this summer it is thought that his birth father molested him. He had to go to the bathroom during his visit and the person supervising let them go into the house and bathroom by themselves. He came back home disassociated, not able to close his eyes because he sees monsters, Sensory integration worse than ever ie letting self fall off front porch, walking on tippy toes all of the time, not able to use the bathroom or go near it. Chose instead to potty either outside or in a potty chair in the middle of the living room. Showered outside under a hose for 3 weeks. He is now on medication to sleep, control the out of control anxiety that he feels, and to help him be able to just survive daily. He had come so far from when he was placed and regressed farther back than he had ever been in our care. We are the ones who let him go to the visit in his eyes we did not keep him safe. We had to build up his trust in us in order to have him begin to heal

10 yo boy went on to live in a treatment facility after beating me up. Trauma to our entire family.

11 yo boy who was RAD, bipolar, autistic and FAS, had been placed in several treatment facilities, and went on to live in another one.

We have a 1.5 yo and 2 yo sibling group they have been placed with us for 14 mo. They are both globally DD.

They have speech, occupational, and physical therapy. The 2 y.o. also sees a ped psych. When they came the 1.5 mo old was lethargic. Did not care what was going on in the

world around her. The 2 yo was regressed and had scattered attachment. During a recent visit at the birth home the supervisor was taken down stairs and the 1.5 yo was left upstairs with birth mom. Birth mom started yelling molestation. Had the nanny they had move in with them look and she stated she thought her hymen was torn. Birth parents call their attny who in turn calls the police 4 times. They take the child to 1<sup>st</sup> step, a medical facility and she is examined. They find nothing except a slight rash. When the child is returned to Our care we take her to her regular ped to back the other med exam. He does not have any worries after exam, maybe just a slight rash. Birth parents are not happy with 2 DX so they request for copies of the tapes from 1<sup>st</sup> exam. They are not able to have it, so they hire a private DR to go look at video who concurs with first and second exams. The children take 2 weeks to recover from the chaos of that one 4 hour visit. The 2 yo has regressed back to biting, pinching, and hitting family and pets. 1.5y.o is just wanting to be held and weepy. This particular set of parents has had an parent advocate attach herself to them causing further chaos in this case. When more people come into the picture it causes more chaos and the case seems to become about the parents and it becomes hard to meet the needs of the children

As well as you can see after public comment  
birth care is not a safe thing to do.  
We do have birth parents follow us, false accusations,  
and other verbal/emotional abuse. We are  
constantly looking over our shoulders to  
keep our families safe.

Thank you again for having the voices  
of our children even if it comes from  
the lesser parents mouths.

Renee B. Smith

## Recommendations:

### Tenured social workers mentor new social workers

1. This will help the new social worker feel less overwhelmed and allow them to learn how to handle each case.

### Need for more social workers.

1. Too large a case load the needs of each child and case can not be met if they are continually asked to take on more cases and asked to do more ie paper work.
2. It would be nice to have the social worker come to our house every other week and see the kids they are advocating for. Due to case load this is not possible.
3. Give access to the follow the child program at the home of the social worker on call for emergency removals *also the social worker should*

### Option to attend court hearings.

### In regards to Foster parents

1. Considered part of the team, We spend more time with the children than any other person on the team, our insight, and opinions are valuable for the children. Foster parents are speaking for the needs of the children placed in care.
2. By stating team it is meant to include the social worker, therapists, and the school.
3. During these meetings at the office there could be a supervised play room for our children. It is often hard to find child care for our many appointments and meetings.
4. Foster parents help in the making of the case plan for each child.
5. It is in the best interest of children to have quality foster parents and for the pool of parents to grow, this will not be achieved if there are not parameters put into place to ensure foster parents and children protection and safety from hard to handle parents. Possibly a bill of rights for foster parents.
6. Input from the foster parents regarding visitation. Children often take 24-48 hours to recover from a visits. We will be able to see if they need shorter, longer, less frequent, or more visits.

The drag of the legal system.

1. We need to remember there is a federal law that states if a child is placed in out of home care for 15 of the last 22 months termination needs to be started.
2. A lot of these cases become about the parents not the children, the focus needs to be kept on the child. We need to remember these children are victims, hurt, lost, and aching inside, they want and deserve permanency. I will quote a therapist we have worked with, "Social workers remove children from abusive and neglectful homes. When the case moves into the courts the children are further neglected by the attorneys whose case loads are too large and are abused by courts by allowing the drag to continue." It is not in the best interest of the kids to live in limbo, sometimes for years. I recognize it is hard for judges to make these decisions for children, however it is a must for the sake of our kids.

Visitation

1. These need to be supervised by trained professionals.
2. It may take 2 supervisors at these visits because of the amount of kids, their needs ie bathroom help, diaper changes, one child wanting to be outside with one parent and the other children inside. If there are 2 it will be harder for the parents to manipulate the situation. These kids should never be left alone. We need to remember the children are going to visit the very people who have abused and neglected them and it is the supervisors job to help them feel safe, most importantly keep them safe.

Missoula Counties new building

1. DCFS is sharing space with other offices in the building. The waiting room is also shared with other offices. This set up provides no privacy or confidentiality for the children, their birth families, or the foster parents. This proves to be overwhelming at times for all involved. The others in the room hear all that is said in the waiting room. There is only 1 public restroom for these offices to share. It needs to be redesigned to meet the safety and well being needed for kids. More restrooms and possibly one

for children

In closing I want to state that it becomes hard to meet the needs of the children when our observations and opinions are not taken seriously..

I am speaking from my own personal experience living in foster care until I eventually aged out and on behalf of our children.

Early intervention is the key to helping kids. They all deserve to live a happy, fun and joyful life and that is next to impossible to do when you live in limbo. Social workers have been trained to manage cases and do all that is possible to reunite families or find permanency for these kids. They are not able to do that because the legal teams seem to drive the cases. Most of the people on the legal team do not even know what these children look like. I realize this is a hard part of our society to deal with but we have to and delaying cases in court is not the answer it only adds to the problem.