

My name is Stacey Cooper. My husband David and I were Foster Parents from 1998 through We had two biological children at the time, Shannon was four and Atticus was two. After taking the Foster Parent classes, we decided that we would take children four and under as we really didn't want children older than Shannon. I'm not sure how many children we fostered during that time but it was quite a few. We fostered neglected children, infants that tested positive for having drugs in their systems, children removed due to violence or molestation. Occasionally we did foster older children in an emergency for a few days.

The most frustrating thing in doing foster care was the system not abiding by Kansas law in finding that the child should be returned home or severing parental rights and placing the child for adoption in 18 months. We had two children that were removed from their home because their mother was living with a man found to be a child predator. We had them as foster children for two years before the court determined reunification was not possible. Some children remain in foster care for a much longer time. This is not fair to anyone involved the child, siblings and parents. Another two children we fostered were removed for neglect. The parents met in a state hospital. The children were 13 months apart and were 15 months and three months when they were placed with us. After 19 months we asked for a hearing before the Citizen Review Board to recommend that the children be placed back in the home or proceed for severance of parental rights.

Each case was reviewed every six months. Oftentimes the parent would have completed one or more of the things they needed to do for reunification. For example one thing might be to find appropriate housing and no boyfriend living there. They show the court they have housing at that time. Within a few weeks of court, they either lose the housing or the boyfriend moves in. This happens over and over.

The Social Workers and Guardian ad Litem have too many cases to actually be able to keep up with the children, family, foster parents and court. At court the Social Worker's boss can give a report that is in disagreement with the people who work closest with the child. If this happens, the Social Worker is not able to contradict that report. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing.

As foster parents, we were very active in advocating for our children we fostered. We were also attorneys so we knew the system. Most foster parents don't know the system and the best way to advocate for their foster children.

The system fails many of these children and part of that is because there is not a central office that knows what is going on. The Social Worker is bombarded with updates from foster parents, CASA volunteers, psychologists, medical doctors, Guardian ad Litem and others. There are too many players and not enough coaches.

Children deserve better. They deserve to be surrounded by advocates that want to do the job, not just because it's a job. They deserve to have an Office of the Child Advocate to oversee those that are supposed to be looking out for the children's best interest, to make sure permanency is reached within the statutory time frame and above all, protected.