

Foster Care and Adoption

S U C C E S S F U L F A M I L I E S

THE KOLSEN FAMILY

Motivated to do more.

Valorie and Doug Kolsen love children. Almost a decade ago, the couple adopted two children through a private agency. The emotional ups and downs that accompanied the lengthy adoption process took a heavy toll. Much to their dismay, the couple learned there was very little support available to parents going through the adoption process. Even worse, the private agency offered no support at all once the children were adopted. They suspected

their experience was not unique. With a great deal of hard work and the able assistance of other adoptive families, the Kolsens formed a support group. The group often participates in seminars sponsored by state or municipal agencies. One such seminar involving the Idaho Department of

Health and Welfare dealt with foster care. Learning about the need for foster parents was all it took to motivate the Kolsens to embrace foster care.

Learning the ropes.

In 1996, Valorie and Doug signed up to serve as foster parents. Their first child, a two-month old boy, was born to a woman addicted to methamphetamines. According to Valorie, it was not a simple assignment. "He was a fussy child," Valorie admits. "He would rock his head and sometimes make squealing noises, and he was very sensitive to light." Not easily discouraged, the Kolsens kept the boy, eventually adopting him. Today he is a healthy child who shows few

indications of his tough beginnings. As Valorie talks about her son, it's easy to detect a mother's pride in her voice. "There is some speech delay, but other than that he does very well," she says. "In fact, he is very athletically skilled."

Living with the process, the pain, and the joy.

It is not unusual for the Kolsens to receive a desperate call for help in the middle of the night. Valorie explains: "Most of the calls from Health and Welfare come at 12:30 in the morning. My husband works nights, so sometimes he comes home to a surprise." Two years ago, the couple received a late-night request to take in an 18-month-old child who had been exposed to domestic violence. When the child arrived, he was dirty and had no clothes or food. Valorie learned early on to always keep a change of clothes close at hand.

When the child first arrived, he was very calm. But soon he began hiding under the dining table, arranging the chairs in such a way as to form a protective barrier against the outside world. It was clear that exposure to violence had left the child feeling hurt and very much afraid. "Once," Valorie recounts, "he became hysterical, clenched his fists, and turned blue, just because my husband gave me a bear hug." Later, when the boy was two, he pointed to a bruise on Valorie's leg and asked, "Did daddy do?"

By providing the boy with a safe and secure environment at a critical juncture in his life, Valorie



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*- Valorie Kolsen,
foster care provider*



and Doug were able to help him overcome much of the fear and anxiety associated with his former life. Today, a healthy and happy child of four, he remains a part of the family as the adopted son of Valorie's brother.

Sharing the experience.

Valorie and Doug both believe that exposure to the foster care experience has had a positive effect on their children. Valorie cites a specific example to prove her point: "It was around Christmas time and one of my kids was feeling badly about having to share his mother with a foster child. I asked how he would feel if he were in this child's situation. Wouldn't he want to be treated kindly?" Before long her son was playing with the foster child. Later he came up to her and said, "Now, I get it." For Valorie, empathy is a lesson worth learning.

Building one family from many parts.

Empathy is not the only lesson in the Kolsen family curriculum. Valorie and Doug have a total of three adopted children, one is Hispanic, one is African American, and one is Native American. The Kolsens emphasize the strength of the family with the kids, but they also discuss the importance of knowing who you are and taking pride in the differences. Valorie explains, "The kids put their hands together to see the difference in color. They know they are different and we encourage them to learn about

their ethnicity, but we also stress how we are the same — one family, together." That concept of family extends to include the foster children, too. Certainly making everyone feel included and valued is not always an easy task, but for the Kolsens it is just as important for the individual members as it is for the family as a whole.

Committed to providing foster care.

Valorie and Doug remain committed to the foster care program. They see their role as providing a helping hand at a time of need. When asked about feelings of separation, Valorie is quite candid: "Sometimes it is easier than others. Sure you shed some tears, but that is okay. You're helping these kids through tough times. When you watch them grow up and they are healthy and happy, it's an amazing thing."

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For additional information about foster care or adoption, call the Idaho CareLine at 211 or go to www.idahochild.org