



## **Kids These Days: Celebrating Caregivers**

By Dr. David Rideout

During a very enjoyable career that now spans over three decades, I've had the privilege of working for thousands of children and teenagers. I recall with great fondness the many young people who skipped, dawdled, scurried, trudged or sauntered into my classroom when I was a teaching principal in the 1980s. Every one of those youth so vastly different—and yet, in some ways, so similar.

One thing I observed over the years, both in my classrooms and in my own family, is that all children need the same basic elements to survive and to thrive. They need food, shelter and clothing, of course, and they need to be safe. They need to belong somewhere and to someone. They also need caring adults to help nurture and guide them - and believe in them.

For some children, those very basic necessities are not always available. These are the ones who come into the care of the child protection system. They are often vulnerable and wounded, coming from a place of trauma or tragedy. Many of them are victimized by neglect, physical abuse, sexual exploitation, family violence, or substance abuse. Sometimes their very lives are at risk and for their own safety, they must be removed from their home

Who cares for these vulnerable children when their family is unable or unwilling to look after them? In many cases, it is a foster or kinship family—that is, extended family members who step up to help. Foster and kinship families are the extraordinary people who open their heart and their home to children and youth in crisis—often without time to prepare since crises can happen without warning. These caring individuals offer a safe place, a warm bed, a nutritious meal and a caring heart. Foster or kinship families can be a lifeline in those situations, helping a child to learn to trust again, love and be loved.

Every child needs a family and helping children return to their biological family is always the first aim. Foster families can be the bridge to maintain that connection, working with biological families while they address the issues that brought their children into care. In addition to meeting emotional and physical needs, foster families understand and support children's cultural, spiritual and familial ties so that in the best case scenario, these children can eventually return to their family and to their roots.

A child's stay in a foster home may be for a few days, weeks, months or even years, but the relationships forged between a child and foster or kinship parent can last a lifetime. When youth in care graduate high school, their foster parents are usually there to cheer them on. Many a foster father has walked a young bride down the aisle.

I've been privileged to meet many of these families in my current role as Regional Director of North Central Alberta Child and Family Services. It is always a highlight for me to celebrate our caregivers, observing firsthand their selfless dedication and the positive impact they make on the lives of children in their care.

During the third week in October, we recognize foster and kinship families across all of Alberta who are making a difference in a child's life. I invite you to join me in extending a heartfelt thanks to all of them.

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