

Fostering: The toughest job you'll ever love

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, April 28, 2016 10:44 am

Foster parents Jenn and Jeremy Burtsch say it's the toughest job they'll ever love.

They take children in, sometimes on next-to-no notice, provide a loving home for anywhere from two weeks to three years, give all the support and stability they can, and then let them go.

The Fort Atkinson couple have served as foster parents for the past eight years. Licensed through Jefferson County, they foster children from newborns through 8-year-olds who, for whatever reason, have been removed from their parents.

Including those for whom they provide respite care, the Fort Atkinson couple has fostered about 30 children in total.

Since the Burtsches have two biological children, ages 13 and 11, they chose to focus on younger children for whom their children can serve as mentors and role models. They said their children have developed a high level of empathy and are very welcoming to their foster siblings.

"We started out in Milwaukee County, doing treatment foster care there — that's a higher level of need," Jeremy said.

He formerly worked as a case manager at a treatment foster care agency. Jeremy said he really enjoyed the work and, when he left the agency, he talked to officials there about serving as a foster care provider.

"We got licensed with the treatment foster care agency, and now we do regular foster care through Jefferson County," Jeremy said.

The Burtsches said that a lot of training goes into becoming a foster parent, along with stringent background checks and lots and lots of paperwork.

"We're re-licensed every two years, and we have to maintain 10 hours of continuing education every year," Jenn said.

Foster care is not their primary job. Although they do receive a stipend to cover the children's essential expenses, foster parents need to be self-supporting. They do it out of a love for children and a sincere desire to help those who are most vulnerable.

"Many of the children we take in come from neglected homes," Jenn said. "In a lot of cases, they've been left to fend for themselves, so they don't have boundaries. It's difficult to change that mindset. Our role is to keep them safe, and to show them love and proper care. We need to

give them the consistency, compassion and discipline they need and to show them a different way to live.”

Many people foster children with an eye on adopting in the long term. The Burtsches have gone a different route, choosing to open their home to as many children as possible. After all, many of the children in the foster care system will be heading back to their birth families after a crisis is resolved.

When a new child comes to the home, the Burtsches immediately offer him or her food.

“A lot of times, they come in hungry,” Jenn noted.

Then they give a tour of their home, showing where the toys are, the bathroom is and the room they can call their own.

“The other really important thing is that we let the children know they are safe here,” Jeremy said. “They are not going to be hit. They’re not going to be abused. They have their own bedroom, right across from ours.”

“We try to give them space,” Jenn said.

The Burtsches try to provide a routine, so children know what to expect. They set consistent mealtimes and bedtimes and sit down at the dinner table together every night.

“And no, the TV is not on,” Jenn said. “We’re there to listen.”

It’s hard work, as the foster children arrive from a place of upheaval. Due to problems early in their lives, they often are behind others in terms of social behaviors, manners and potty training, not to mention academics, if they’re school-aged.

“We had a 5-year-old who wasn’t potty-trained,” Jenn said. “That was really hard for him. You miss out on a lot of social life with these challenges.”

The challenges can be physical, as well as social.

The Burtsches recalled fostering one girl who came to them with very low muscle tone, constant drooling, significant medical issues and cognitive delays.

“We were able to provide her with a schedule of occupational and physical therapy, connect her to the Birth-to-3 program, and get her all the services she needed through the local schools. It made a huge difference in her development,” Jenn said. “Now she is thriving, and we are still in contact with her and her family.”

The Burtsches said they try to have a good relationship with their foster children’s biological parents, if possible.

“That’s so important if there’s a chance they’ll be going back,” Jenn said.

Occasionally, the Burtsches will be approached by a well-meaning member of the community who, seeing the parents and their biological children with someone who has a different skin tone or apparent heritage, asks, “Oh, is he yours?”

“We just say, ‘Yes, they’re ours for now,’” Jenn said.

“We don’t discriminate. They’re all our children,” she added.

With older children, the Burtsches tend to ask the children themselves what they want their foster parents to say.

Foster parenting brings many challenges, but it also brings tremendous rewards, the Burtsches said, noting that it’s just a tremendous feeling to know you’ve made a positive difference in the life of a young child.

The responsibility is not for everyone, the Fort Atkinson couple cautioned.

“You’re not babysitting; you’re parenting,” Jenn said.

“It’s a day-in, day-out job,” Jeremy added.

Jenn noted that many people don’t know it’s possible to foster children as a single parent as well, but as for their family, they are glad to shoulder the burden together.

“I think having a solid marriage and a solid family foundation to start with is essential,” Jeremy said. “When you’re dealing with behavioral issues and challenges, good communication is really essential, and both parents need to be on the same page.”

With wry smiles, they described days of children throwing furniture and calling them names, nights with youngsters screaming until close to midnight, and, of course the regular round-the-clock demands of parenting babies.

“There are definitely good days and not-so-good days,” Jenn said. “Your heart goes out to every single one of them. When you hear their backstory, you just want to scoop them up and save them.

“Then the challenging behaviors kick in,” she said. “They can make you question yourself as a parent, question whether you have the personal strength to do this every day.”

The Burtsches said they have found the county’s foster parent support group incredibly helpful. All of the members are very committed, very dedicated, but they appreciate the outlet of being able to talk to someone who understands the challenges — and why they stick with this responsibility despite everything.