



Foster Care: Getting Started and Succeeding

Callie Grant: Welcome. You're listening to the Newborn Promise Podcast, for building up new families in Christian faith.

Callie Grant: We're here today with Chrystal Smith, the founder and executive director of Foster Village in Austin, Texas. Welcome Chrystal.

Chrystal Smith: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Callie Grant: Well I appreciate your time because I know as the founder of Foster Village and the executive director and the mom of four children, you're a busy woman, so we very much appreciate your time.

Chrystal Smith: Oh, well thank you.

Callie Grant: So I want to start with your experience of deciding to become a foster parent, which is a very personal decision and it can be a hard choice for many couples. Let's start with your family and learn about your decision to become foster parents.

Chrystal Smith: Yes. So foster care was not something that had really been on my radar for most of my life. We had three children and thought we were done growing our family. In 2013 my husband and I and our three sons went on a mission trip and while we were there God just kind of planning some seeds to step into the world of adoption or foster care, we weren't really sure at the time what it was going to look like. Ultimately my husband was the one who kind of prompted us after that trip to look into foster care.

Chrystal Smith: My initial response to that was what most people say, where I would get too attached, or we have young kids in the home and just all the hard things that come to mind.

Callie Grant: Yeah.

Chrystal Smith: And so ultimately I think God just made it really clear that that was kind of the path he had for us so we took the leap and became a licensed foster family in 2014.

Callie Grant: Wow. Well so how did you get that confirmation from God? Because it can come in a variety of different ways, but what would you say ... Were there a combination of things or one particular thing that cemented it for you or was it just the process? Going through the process relieved your fears about it?

Chrystal Smith: Yeah. So I think it was definitely a combination of things and I think one of the big turning points for me was being able to connect with another family who had gone through the process of becoming a foster family and then seeing the children that they have been love in their home and just putting that sort of visual of what it could look like, I think opened my eyes to how it doesn't have to be scary and it's not always the horror stories that we hear about on the news.

Callie Grant: Oh, that's great. That's really helpful. But do tell us about the process because there's several steps involved for becoming a foster parent.

Chrystal Smith: Yes. So it was lots of classes. So typically when somebody's interested in becoming a licensed foster family, they'll find what's called a child placement agency that walks them through the process of getting licensed. So there was lots of classes on caring for kids in foster care. Some kind of administrative classes in terms of how to log all the various things that you need to track. There's lots of paperwork. Lots and lots of paperwork. Background checks. CPR training and just trauma informed care tips and things like that. So it was mostly classes and paperwork.

Callie Grant: That sounds like more preparation than having an actual baby.

Chrystal Smith: Definitely.

Callie Grant: All the steps involved. How much time would you say that took? How long that took?

Chrystal Smith: So for us we were able to ... because once we made the decision we knew we needed the just ... and this is kind of our style for my husband and I, where we just hit the ground running and wanted to knock it out as quick as possible. So we became licensed in three months. The average amount of time that it takes most families is closer to six to twelve months. Some folks can get licensed within a month. It definitely varies, but the average is around six months.

Callie Grant: Okay. All right. Well tell us the first experiences that you had as a foster parent and what that was like?

Chrystal Smith: So after we became licensed, we became licensed April 14th, and we got a call within that first week asking if we would take two sisters and we said yes, and thought we were only going to have one kiddo and-

Callie Grant: Surprise.

Chrystal Smith: Yeah. So we scrambled and then got a call back saying they had found another home for those girls. So we kind of got our first taste of how that works. We waited about another week before we got our next call and the next call was for an eight month old baby girl, and we said yes again. There was an investigator at our door with this terrified, traumatized baby two hours later. So from the time we got the call to the time they were at our door was about two hours. Lots of paperwork and things on the front end and kind of hearing the really hard realities of why she was brought into foster care and going through that process of signing papers and hearing some of her history. And it's always sort of a hodgepodge of information that you get. Then they left and we had this new precious baby to get to know in our home from there.

Callie Grant: Well was that a very difficult transition for her to get used to the new environment or ... What was that like?

Chrystal Smith: So for most states foster parents have to get the children in to see a pediatrician within the first few days and then if they're older kids, they need to get them registered for school and then they have to get them scheduled for visitations and all these things, so there's a lot in terms of planning and preparation on our end. But then at the same time we thought we were prepared for any age, but there's no way you can truly prepare when you don't know gender or age or how many kids. So we spent a lot of time just running around town trying to get her clothing and formula and diapers and baby gear and all that stuff that she needed.

Chrystal Smith: Then at the same time one of the first things I noticed when the investigator brought her into our house was that she had a lipstick kiss on her cheek and it just really impacted me in that moment of realizing that she was just taken from her mom and from this person who clearly loves her, and just processing the brokenness of that part of it too.

Callie Grant: Oh me, wow. How did your kids respond? What ages were they, your own children and how did they respond?

Chrystal Smith: So our boys were 12, 10 and ... no excuse me, 11, 9 and 3 at the time and they I think were ... They probably processed and embraced it quicker than we did as adults. Because to them it just made sense that there's this child who needs a safe place to stay and we have a safe place so of course yes, let's love on her and let's share our toys and make sure she has snacks, and so they were really great about just jumping right in and starting a bond with her and it was very sweet.

Callie Grant: Oh, that is sweet. Tell us in all of this, like these first weeks, how long did she end up staying with you?

Chrystal Smith: So we fostered for 19 months before we ultimately adopted her.

Callie Grant: Okay.

Chrystal Smith: And during that time of fostering the plan initially was reunification and we got to know her birth mom and fell in love with her and just really wanted to be cheerleaders for her as she as trying to do what she needed to do to get on her feet. She's a former foster youth herself and so we just really wanted to be a support system to her as well. So there were points while we were fostering where CPS let us know that our daughter was going to be moved to a different home because what happens a lot of times is distant relatives or friends of the family will come forward later into a case and say that they want to be placement and so there's just a lot of back and forth and a lot of limbo in terms of deciding what is going to be best for the kiddos. Ultimately our daughter's birth mom decided that she wanted us to adopt her and so I sat with her while she signed relinquishment papers and she's still very much a part of our family too.

Callie Grant: Oh wow, what a great story. I wasn't sure. I knew you had fostered and adopted, but I wasn't sure if this experience was the child that you went on to adopt. That's a wonderful story. Wow.

Callie Grant: I take it you haven't been fostering any more lately?

Chrystal Smith: No. So we did a lot of respite care while we were fostering and then also after we finalized our adoption. We wanted to just be a support system to other foster families, so respite care is basically babysitting for another foster family. So we had lots of kiddos come through our home while we were fostering and shortly thereafter for short term.

Callie Grant: Oh wow, that's great.

Chrystal Smith: Yeah.

Callie Grant: That's really wonderful. Tell me in all that experience what surprised you the most?

Chrystal Smith: I think going into it we imagined our role as foster parents as being more of these folks who could come in and pull a child out of hard circumstances and away from this dark world, so to speak. And I think what surprised me most is really that God used it as an opportunity to pull us into these trenches and this brokenness and to open our eyes to ... that our role is to foster a family unit as a whole and to love all parties involved the best we could and to really just walk alongside people. We weren't the saviors in this story by any means.

Callie Grant: Wow. Well how is it different for your husband?

Chrystal Smith: I think that as you know the leader of our family, I think he probably felt the most pressure as far as being the rock, so to speak, and being emotionally steady through all of it, 'cause it really is emotionally trying and exhausting to live in limbo where you're caring for this child that you don't know how long you're going to have them and just the ups and downs and twists and turns and having people coming through your house all the time and you could get a knock at the door at any minute from CPS wanting to come and do an inspection and just feeling really in limbo.

Chrystal Smith: And so I think it was a lot of pressure for him as the leader of our family to just kind of try to keep everybody steady.

Callie Grant: Yeah, I can imagine. How did it impact your marriage then, you know kind of being on the edge like that all the time?

Chrystal Smith: Yeah so I think it definitely both challenged and strengthened our marriage.

Callie Grant: Yeah.

Chrystal Smith: So it pushes ... I think we each would kind of find our limits and get to the end of our rope with stress and fear and exhaustion and just functioning in kind of a state of survival mode and in that I think we had to really gain some tools and communication practices and things that have since served us well and strengthened our marriage.

Callie Grant: Well that's a really good point, just in terms of the stress on the marriage and it becoming a tool to strengthen the marriage. Let's go into a little bit now about you founded Foster Village and the thinking behind that. You obviously ... That was a great experience for you being a foster parent, but it was a very difficult one.

Chrystal Smith: Yes. So when we started fostering we didn't know any local foster families and so we thought we can kind of figure this out and as we got further into it we realized that we really needed to broaden our network of folks who were in the process of fostering or who had fostered and just kind of gathering that village, so to speak, of people who understood, who we could relate to and ask the hard questions to or be honest with without feeling risk of judgment. So as we were meeting all these families, we kept hearing the same thing that a lot of families are feeling isolated and disconnected from their support groups and that they just were really desperate for encouragement and connection from folks who could understand what it was like, the season that they were in.

Chrystal Smith: At the same time we would meet families every now and then who just would have positive great things to say about foster care and their experience fostering and that they just were really thriving and the kids in their care were

thriving and they were fostering multiple placements and having a really great success with it. The one commonality that I found with all those families who were thriving and doing really well is that they had a solid, great support system in place. Being family, church, their community, they just had this wraparound network that was walking through it with them every step of the way.

Chrystal Smith: That stuck with me and I thought I really wanted to figure out how we could replicate that for everyone and how as a community we could do a better job of coming alongside families who are doing the hard work.

Callie Grant: Wow that's fantastic. And so starting a non-profit is not a small adventure either. Tell us how it got off the ground.

Chrystal Smith: Yeah, so, really it started as just kind of that mission of coming alongside other foster families and this sort of grass roots community movement blossomed from there where we started showing up for foster families with those basic necessities when they would get a new placement and bring them meals and babysitting and just trying to be a constant presence for them. And then we would talk to other folks in the community who said, "We really want to be a support system we just don't know how." So we wanted to bridge that gap and so making that connection. So it just started this system of, hey we're going to show up for this family and you can do this and you can do this and coordinating it that way.

Chrystal Smith: Then we realized it was becoming quite a system and there was a lot of people wanting to get involved so we pursued becoming a non-profit organization and getting our 501(c)(3) designation and God just kept bringing the right people alongside of us to use their gifts and their experience and knowledge to help us go through that process.

Callie Grant: Oh wow, that's fantastic. It is wonderful to see God at work in circumstances like that. It does seem like more and more people are fostering today, or there's just more conversation about it in churches and just even a MOPS conference that we attended last week, we encountered people who are fostering that had already ... like you, started their families and ... But some people come to fostering after struggling with infertility and maybe even miscarriage and so they're just ready to love on children and decide to foster.

Callie Grant: Any advice or words of wisdom for couples like that, that are already coming ... and for their marriages, who are already kind of walking into this a little battle scarred.

Chrystal Smith: Right. I think it's fairly common and we know a lot of families who have that experience and that's kind of been the path leading them to the world of foster care. I think it is really tough and it's something to be mindful and I know some licensing or child placement agencies when they're licensing a family who has been through infertility and their adoption motivated, that they encourage

them to go through some counseling initially just so that they can be in a healthy place understanding that the world of foster care generally ... So 70 percent of the children in our area are reunified with family members.

Chrystal Smith: So while there are a lot of children who need to be adopted and who ... Adoption is a part of the world of foster care, a lot of times we need folks who understand that reunification is a great picture of the Gospel as well. That adoption is wonderful and an amazing thing to have as part of your family story, but reunification is also an incredible privilege to be a part of.

Callie Grant: Redemption.

Chrystal Smith: Yes. And so I think that if having the expectations going into it of knowing that it doesn't always necessarily end in adoption and that's okay, I think is healthy.

Callie Grant: Yeah, wow. Give us an overview of the state of fostering today. Just maybe some needs and trends across the country.

Chrystal Smith: Yeah so, in the United States there's over 400,000 children in the foster system and the average age is eight years old. But there's babies, there's newborns who are going into foster care, a lot of times due to drug exposure. The main reason that children are placed in foster care in Texas right now is due to neglectful supervision and a lot of that is tied to drug abuse and ... or substance abuse. That's the main reason that children are coming into foster care in Texas right now.

Callie Grant: What advice do you have for couples who are considering to become foster parents?

Chrystal Smith: I would say definitely the best place to start is meeting other folks who have or are currently fostering and just really having that front line exposure and understanding of what it's like. I think it's ... for the most part I think it's reassuring to most people to kind of see and understand, like oh, okay it's not as scary as I think it is, or oh you know these kids are just like my kids and they're beautiful and sweet and lovely kids and that it's not again the horror stories that we tend to hear on the news.

Chrystal Smith: So I think that meeting other foster families is a great starting point, just to kind of get your feet wet and understand what it could be like, what it typically is like. We have a lot of volunteers who have started with us at Foster Village just as volunteers and they've had the opportunity to meet other foster families and meet the kids and suddenly it becomes a lot less scary to them and so they've gone on to become licensed foster families.

Chrystal Smith: So we've had 13 now, volunteers who started as volunteers and went on to get [crosstalk 00:21:03].

Callie Grant: Be careful what you volunteer for.

Chrystal Smith: Exactly. Yeah.

Callie Grant: God's going to stretch you even more.

Chrystal Smith: Yeah. Yeah.

Callie Grant: Well that's great. That's really fantastic. I guess that's one of the volunteer hazards at Foster Village.

Chrystal Smith: Yeah. We don't put that in the disclaimer but it is.

Callie Grant: Job description or workplace hazards, volunteer hazards. What would you say, since we brought up volunteers, what would you say, people who aren't in a position to foster but hearts are definitely going out for all the children sleeping at CPS that don't have a home to go to, what would you say for people who want to jump in and help?

Chrystal Smith: Yes. So there's a common thing that not everybody can foster, but everyone can do something and I think that that is very true and it's really kind of the heart of Foster Village and you know that village, so to speak. That everybody can play a part in pouring into these kids and families and so I think one of the first things that we ask people when they come here with an interest to volunteer is, "What do you consider your gifts, what are your skill sets?" We have some retirees where their skillset is making Excel spreadsheets, which is great in a non-profit, to have somebody who can just plug away at the data.

Callie Grant: God bless them.

Chrystal Smith: Yes, yes. And then some folks who love organizing and they help with our sorting donations and things like that. So just figuring out what your gifts are, what your resources are, whether that's time or financial gifts, or you're great at shopping for deals and we want to go buy all the cute pj's at the end of the season to make sure that we have pajamas available for the kids next season. So I think just figuring out what God has gifted you with that you can contribute, I think is a really great place to start.

Callie Grant: I'm curious too what it's like on the other side, on the agency side or the government side. You know the investigators, the case workers, what is it like working with them?

Chrystal Smith: Yes. So I mean they just have an incredibly hard and important job. The case workers who are ... you know they can have 30, 40 cases at once and they're responsible for so much and trying to juggle so much and not given the tools and resources that they need to help make sure these kids, their needs are met. So I have a lot of respect for them because I do know that they have an

incredibly hard job and I think they get a really ... a bad rap for the most part. But there are some folks who may be ... their season of that job is maybe up and they can explore other things because when they aren't ... when they lose their passion for it, it trickles down to everybody and affects the kids and it can be especially hard for the foster parents when they're trying to advocate for kids who don't have folks in the role that are doing the best job of making sure that they're getting all their needs met.

Callie Grant: I imagine it can be a really high burnout job.

Chrystal Smith: Yes, yes. I think there is ... tends to be a really high burnout rate and the social work-

Callie Grant: Compassion fatigue.

Chrystal Smith: Yes. Compassion fatigue is real.

Callie Grant: Well Chrystal thank you so much for being here today. And in closing I would just like to ask what your prayer would be for couples and families considering fostering?

Chrystal Smith: I would say that my prayer for listeners is that if God has planted the seeds of foster care, whether it's to serve in that field in some way or whether it's just really jump into it and become a licensed foster family or pour into another foster family that you know of, to just really follow that and to lean into that and not wait for the perfect time. Because really there's no perfect time to foster. There's no perfect time to show up for those who may be needing support. So I would say that I just ... my prayer is that folks will just feel compelled to take that first step and be willing to get a little messy and a little uncomfortable in terms of what it could look like. But just taking that first step and getting their feet wet and seeing where God leads from there.

Callie Grant: Thanks again for listening to the Newborn Promise Podcast. For more information about building up new families in Christian faith, visit <http://www.grahamblanchard.com>

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