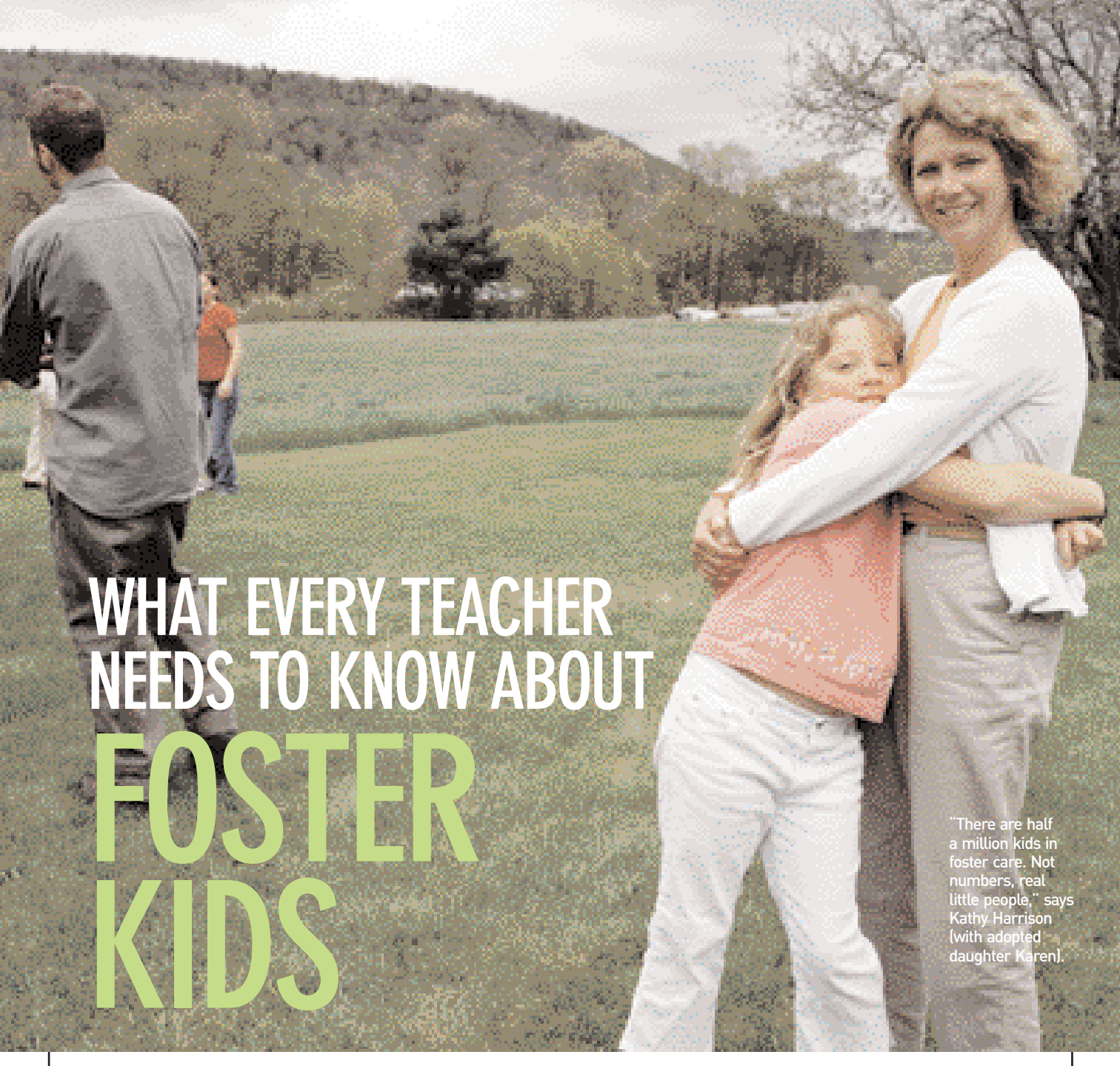

WHAT EVERY TEACHER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT FOSTER KIDS

"There are half a million kids in foster care. Not numbers, real little people," says Kathy Harrison (with adopted daughter Karen).

Words of wisdom from a foster mother to more than 100 children.

By Kathy Harrison

When my three sons were in elementary school, my husband, Bruce, and I happily helped them with all of the usual classroom projects. We sent in baby pictures when they were studying families and helped them research our ancestors for units on immigration. We enjoyed their essays on "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" and treasured every hand-crafted Mother's and Father's Day card. When I began teaching preschool after my youngest child began school, I too asked children to bring in pictures of themselves and gave a "Favorite Family Recipe" book as a Christmas gift. The year was 1989 and I was blissfully ignorant of any other childhood than the kind my sheltered children lived. Then I met Angie.

She was a tough, streetwise little thing with a sharp mind and a bad attitude. After a week of doing battle with her at every turn, I pulled out her file to check her history, desperate to figure out how to help her fit into my class. The

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Kathy Harrison and her husband, Bruce, have a full house. In 1996, the Harrisons were named Massachusetts Foster Parents of the Year.

short summary was appalling but it answered a lot of questions. Angie had lived through more loss and trauma in five short years than I had experienced in my entire life. Hardest to imagine was that she was living in her fourth foster home in less than a year.

After a year of family soul searching, Bruce and I took Angie into our home. Eight months later, we were joined by her older sister, Neddy. Six months later, another child in our school needed a home and he also joined the family. Then we heard about a baby with special needs and a three-year-old with temper tantrums. We looked around the table and counted eight children. I quit my job, bought a van, and got a membership to a warehouse shopping club. I had to face facts. I was a foster mother.

With the shift from teacher to full-time "hotline" foster parent came a shift in the way I saw a teacher's role in helping children adapt to the often painful and socially isolating status of a child in foster care. I still cringe when I think back to the number of small ways I was disrespectful to children in my class, not out of malice but out of ignorance. Now, when I have a child in my care, I make sure to meet with any new teacher to talk briefly about how we can work together to make the school experience a positive one for all of us. Here is my list of ten ways a teacher can support a child in those critical first months.

1. Keep initial demands simple.

Imagine waking up one morning to find that you needed to live with a new family, in a new place, leaving every familiar thing behind. Now imagine that you also were expected to go to work in a new school. How hard would it be to concentrate? Would you feel up to doing a good job? Would you be your best self? I doubt it. Let a child have some time to adjust before assigning a big task.

2. Don't rush to judgment.

What looks like attention problems or oppositional behavior can really be anxiety, grief, or post traumatic stress. Many intelligent children struggle because they have had so many moves that they have missed big chunks of basic skill acquisition and may just need time to catch up.

3. Structure social interactions.

Frequent moves and an early history of abuse and neglect can leave some children sorely lacking in the skills they need to make and keep friends. It often helps to arrange activities that encourage children to interact in a positive way. Pairing kids up for activities and projects can set the stage for a healthier classroom social life. It may be necessary to get the school adjustment or guidance counselor involved in starting a social skills program.

4. Involve foster parents.

Foster parents are sometimes seen as the bad guys who are unwilling to give the children in their care the help they need to succeed in school. This is rarely the case. More often, foster parents are

more concerned with a fragile child's emotional health after a tough school day than with the grade on a math test. A phone call or note from a concerned and understanding teacher may set the stage for great collaboration.

5. Offer curriculum choices that respect family diversity.

Rather than a blanket assignment such as an essay on "How I Spent My Summer Vacation"—a fun paper if you went to camp in Maine but a painful task for a child who spent the summer in a group home—consider choices such as "The Place I Would Most Like To Visit." When assigning projects on cultural heritage, be aware that not all children have access to that information and consider allowing children to choose a country or tradition to explore. On a day-to-day basis, teachers should be talking about, reading about, and including all kinds of families in classroom discussions.

6. Rethink language you use for special days.

I remember the first Mother's Day after my own mother passed away. It was one of the hardest days of my life, and I'm an adult! What must it be like for a child who is away from his mother for the first time? Cards can be made that honor a special woman in each student's life, or children could be offered the opportunity to celebrate their different mothers.

7. Include the child when deciding what information to share.

When in doubt about what to say, ask! Especially as children get older, they may well have very definite ideas about how much they want to share. Those feelings need to be respected. I recently had a foster child return to her parents. There was a goodbye party at school, complete with cupcakes and a small gift. Sadly, the reunification did not work out and the child returned to us. After talking to her about what she wished us to say to the other children, we decided to call her stay a vacation that was now over. That simple statement satisfied her classmates while respecting her privacy.

8. Offer all children the opportunity to be of service.

No child wants to be the constant recipient of the generosity of others. Make sure to include many opportunities for all children to do things to help others. I had a child who generally struggled with reading but when given the opportunity to read to younger children, improved dramatically. As her confidence grew, all of her academics improved.

9. Be the link between past schools and future placements.

It is unfortunately true that children in care often move. Whenever possible, contact old schools and retrieve as much of a child's school history as possible. I had one teacher forward a package of school work along with letters to a child they had not had the opportunity to say goodbye to. That package became this little boy's prized possession. You might be the only repository of a child's school history.

10. Take care of yourself and your class when a child moves.

When a child moves, it is often hard on friends left behind, especially if the move was sudden and the opportunity for closure not present. Classmates may worry about how safe they are if people can just disappear. Take the time to talk about what has happened and offer reassurance that there are adults involved whose job it is to keep children safe. Again, being the link between schools may provide the opportunity to provide closure for everyone involved.

For many children school is their one safe haven in an otherwise unpredictable and unsafe world. As a teacher, you have a unique opportunity to make life better for a child who may have few other allies.

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