



Families Formed With Love



**Resource foster and adoptive parents
make a difference for children in need**



DID YOU KNOW?

Nearly 1,900 children
are in foster care in Kern County



More than 300
of them are currently awaiting adoption



1 in 5 foster children
are in foster care for 5+ years



About 70%
of all children adopted
in Kern County are
5 or younger

From June 2013 – July 2014

206 children

were adopted from Kern
County foster care



You Can Make a Difference in the Life of a Child

Dear Neighbors,

In Kern County there are more than 2,200 dependent children of the court, with 1,900 placed in out-of-home care. The majority of these youth will either reunite with their parents, be cared for by relatives or guardians, or find new loving families through adoption. However, many children will remain in long-term foster care.

Our vision is that every child is safe and healthy with the goal for children to remain safely in the homes of their parents when possible. However, when it is determined the situation in that home is not safe, the child is placed in the care of the Department of Human Services by a judge in the juvenile justice court system.

"No matter their age, every child in foster care benefits from and deserves a meaningful connection to a caring adult."

Dena Murphy
Director, Kern County
Department of Human Services



Social Workers then begin identifying the issues in the home the child was removed from. They work with birth parents to try to address the problems that led to the removal, and seek resolution to the barriers and safety concerns with the goal to reunite children with their parents. During this time, Social Workers are also looking for relatives, or other adults close to the child, who are willing to provide care and safety. Many of the children currently in the

foster care system are placed with relatives. There is strength in the bond of families and children feel more secure when they are in a home that is familiar to them.

When placing with a family member is not possible, we count on those licensed as resource foster families, or certified homes through many of our foster family agencies, to provide a home where children feel safe, supported and cared for. No matter their age, every child in foster care benefits from and deserves a meaningful connection to a caring adult. We know that it takes a very special individual or family to open their heart and their home to others. We also know that the best way to share the level of commitment required to be a resource foster family is to share the stories and testimonies of those who have experiences with foster youth. In the pages laid out in this publication, you will hear from those individuals.

There is no greater responsibility or privilege than being a parent. I trust you will be moved as they share the challenges and the rewards of their experiences. If these experiences tug at your heart, I hope you will consider opening your home to a child who longs to feel safe, loved and cared for.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to being a part of your journey.

– Dena Murphy
Director, Kern County
Department of
Human Services





Nikki and Juan Avila went from a family of two to a family of six overnight when they took in their nephew and his three siblings.
PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

Keeping Families Together

Kinship caregivers welcome home sibling set of four

by Brittany Wesely

In fall 2013, Juan and Nikki Avila got a call from Nikki's brother saying that his son and three stepchildren had been taken into foster care by Child Protective Services. He begged them to care for his son for a little while.

"We saw them all together and were told that they were already living in separate foster homes," Juan says. "It just broke our hearts and we said, 'You know what, we need to take them all together.'"

Overnight the Avila household grew from having no children to four children, but the couple thought the children's stay would be temporary. Perhaps a weekend or two.

"At the beginning it almost felt like a sleepover," Juan says. "The whole process of taking care of kids was so very new to us."

A year later, the Avilas realized the children would likely be living with them permanently. The children had some visitation with their parents, but it was clear that reunification was likely not

going to happen. Nikki says they are committed to the children no matter how long they stay.

"We just want to see their lives change for the better," Nikki says. "We teach the kids that they have the power to make positive choices and that their choices not only impact themselves, but also others."

For the Avilas, it has always been a priority to encourage an ongoing relationship with the biological parents. They continue to tell the children to still honor their parents and remember the positive qualities they possess.

"I don't know how you can demonstrate a greater action of love than to say, 'You know, you might not have your mom and dad, but I want you to have your siblings in your life.'"

Juan Avila
Kinship caregiver



"We want to make sure that the children fully understand that the decisions their parents made had nothing to do with them," Juan says. "They're at a stage now where they realize mom and dad probably aren't going to get better, but they know that they are loved and supported by us."

The courts have recently terminated Reunification Services to the parents, and the Avilas are pursuing legal guardianship, in which parental rights are suspended but not completely terminated.

FOSTER PLACEMENTS

Resource family caregivers include licensed foster parents, relative or kinship caregivers, nonrelated extended family members, or certified adoptive parents. As skilled partners and advocates for foster children, resource family caregivers play a crucial role in supporting foster children through difficult life transitions.

NEARLY ANYONE CAN HELP

Resource caregivers must be financially stable and have the time and space to dedicate to a child in need. As long as you are willing and able to provide a nurturing home for a foster child, you can be a successful resource caregiver, no matter your marital status, property ownership, age or sexual orientation.

SUPPORTING THE REUNIFICATION PROCESS

Returning a foster child to the safe care of his or her biological parents or a family member is always the first goal of Child Protective Services. Foster children first go through a reunification process, in which the court requires the biological parents to accomplish certain tasks within a specified time frame in order to regain custody of the child. Foster parents help support the child's relationship with the biological parents and cooperate toward the goal of reunification.

PROVIDING A FOREVER HOME

If the biological parents are unable to complete the court requirements and it is determined that the child cannot safely return home, then a permanent adoptive home is sought for the child.

For more information, call 661-631-6204.

"We don't want to close the door fully on the possibility of the parents making good choices and for the possibility of reunification, if that's what the children desire," Juan says.

For now, the family of six is enjoying the time they have together, however long that may be. They enjoy going on trips, doing crafts and eating dinner together as a family each night.

"These children are not changed because they've been placed in our household, but we've been changed for the better," Juan says. "We've become better people for having them."

The couple highly recommends being open to the placement of siblings. Nikki says that although the kids don't have their biological parents, they have each other, which helps them adjust to their new life.

"If someone is interested in becoming a foster parent, I highly recommend being open to siblings," Juan says. "I don't know how you can demonstrate a greater action of love than to say, 'You know, you might not have your mom and dad, but I want you to have your siblings in your life.' That is powerful."

Families Grow With Love

Foster-to-adopt parents provide caring homes for children in need

by Brittany Wesely



Jennifer Mercier and her husband, Daren Brians, are foster-adoptive parents to Aiden and Jesse. PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIFER MERCIER

On paper, Jennifer Mercier's family appears to be like any other, with a mother, a father and two children. They enjoy afternoons playing at the park, watching cartoons and taking road trips to the beach. But unlike many other families, Mercier's children did not grow inside her body, but within her heart.

Mercier spent time in foster care as a child and later provided guardianship for her two younger brothers. Her personal experiences inspired Mercier and her husband to give back to children in need, just as people helped her when she needed it most.

"I'm thankful to have had the support I did," Mercier says. "It only takes one person to care. One person to change a child's future. We knew we could help."

In 2013, Mercier and her husband, Daren Brians, decided to become foster parents. The following year they received placement of a 19-day-old African-

American baby boy named Aiden. Three months later, the couple welcomed Aiden's older brother, Jesse, who was 18 months old at the time.

Kern County has a need for families willing to foster or adopt children of ethnic minorities. More than 65 percent of all foster children in the county are not white and one in every 10 is African-

American. Yet those children are often the hardest to place in foster homes. Mercier and Brians helped fill the need by welcoming Aiden and Jesse into their lives.

Mercier says that just because her family differs in appearance and culture doesn't make them any less a family.

"We love them no matter what," Mercier says.

When the boys' adoption was finalized by the court on February 20, 2015, Mercier and her husband felt overjoyed.

"Adopting our boys has made me appreciate life," Mercier says. "Now we're a family and they're

just such a gift. They have made everyday life more enjoyable and fun. I never know what tomorrow looks like and I love it."

Mercier admits that being foster-adoptive parents isn't always easy. There are certainly unique challenges that come with parenting children who have experienced trauma and loss.

Initially, the boys were hesitant to bond and didn't show much affection at all toward their parents or each other.

"We didn't know how long it would take, but we were willing to work as long as we needed to," Mercier says. "A few months later, Jesse called me 'Mom.' He started hugging and kissing Aiden and us. We knew he was finally comfortable and that it was all going to be OK."

Mercier and Brians consider themselves lucky to be able to provide a forever home to Jesse and Aiden, and hope to one day provide love and care for even more children in need.

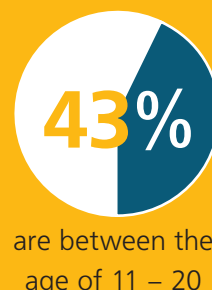
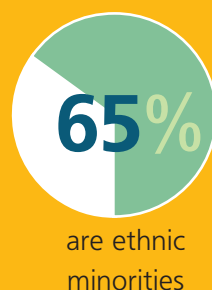
"Being a parent in general is not always easy," Mercier says. "As foster parents we have a little bit more to go through, but watching the kids grow and thrive is well worth it."

"Adopting our boys has made me appreciate life. Now we're a family and they're just such a gift."

Jennifer Mercier
Foster-adoptive mother

**ALL
CHILDREN
NEED
LOVING
HOMES**

Regardless of age, ethnicity or family makeup, all children need the support of stable families. Here's a look at special populations of Kern County foster children who need resource parents to welcome them with open arms.



Leslie Turner-Leader and her husband, Army Morales, have a heart for helping kids in need. They adopted Alicia, 4, and are fostering a pair of brothers, one of whom has special medical needs. PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.



Family Traditions

Passion for caring for vulnerable kids runs in the family

by Mark Lore

Leslie Turner-Leader has witnessed generosity in her family since she was a child. Her grandmother, even while dealing with her own health issues, adopted grandchildren. That selflessness has stayed with Turner-Leader into her own family life.

"It's something my family has always had a heart for," says Turner-Leader. "It's just who we are; it's what we do."

Being able to help them
is what keeps her going.



A stable family life is key for any child. But the rewards to a family that adopts or offers foster care to a child — especially those who are medically fragile — can be just as significant. There are some 1,900 children currently in foster care in Kern County, and there is a need for more families to open up their homes. Families can also foster children with the possibility of eventually adopting them.

Turner-Leader and her husband, Army Morales (who also has a 30-year-old daughter he adopted), are currently providing foster care for 7-year-old Aiden, who has cerebral palsy, and his younger half-brother Andrew. The couple brought them into their family, which also includes their 4-year-old adopted daughter, Alicia. They're in the

process of adopting Aiden, who's quickly become a part of the family.

"It's a blessing to see my 4-year-old give him a kiss on the cheek, even though his hand is going to go right for her hair and pull the band out," says Turner-Leader with a laugh.

Turner-Leader knew that choosing to foster a child with special medical needs would come with its share of challenges, but she's also had extra support. The county provides monthly stipends to resource foster families for care, and additional financial support for kids with special needs. Health care for foster children is also fully covered through Medi-Cal.

Turner-Leader and her family know that by providing foster care, they are providing much-needed stability for a child. The need for appropriate foster placements in Kern County is even greater for certain populations of kids, such as medically fragile children, teenagers and larger sibling groups.

Just as Turner-Leader has witnessed kindness and generosity in her own family, she's also seen firsthand the pressing needs of many innocent children. Being able to help them is what keeps her going. And even if a story doesn't end in a successful adoption, it's important to keep in mind the gift a foster family can give a child.

"They might go back with their family — it's just part of the job," Turner-Leader says. "It doesn't always happen that way. We just do the best we can while we have them."

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Resource foster families don't have to have it all figured out before taking the first step to foster a child. Resources are available to support foster and adoptive families along the way.

Foster and Kinship Care Education Program

Provides quality education and support for caregivers of children and youth in out-of-home care to help you meet their educational, emotional, behavioral and developmental needs.

Bakersfield College
1801 Panorama Drive
Bakersfield, CA 93305
661-395-4737
www.bakersfieldcollege.edu

Foster Parent Association

Assists caregivers of children in foster, adoptive and kinship placements by offering training, understanding and support.

Caregivers of Kern County
P.O. Box 10051
Bakersfield, CA 93389
661-345-2626
ckckids.yolasite.com
questions@ckckids.org

Post-Adoption Support Services (PASS)

Offers 24-hour crisis support, counseling, case management services and support groups for adoptive families.

Koinonia Family Services
4600 American Ave. East, Suite 101
Bakersfield, CA 93309
661-833-4483
www.kfh.org
kernpass@kfh.org

Kinship Support Services Program

Provides support for relative caregivers and the children placed in their homes. Services are provided in both English and Spanish.

Henrietta Weill Memorial Child Guidance Clinic
3628 Stockdale Highway
Bakersfield, CA 93309
661-322-1021
www.hwmcgc.org

For more information, call 661-631-6204.

Open Your Heart to a Child in Need

Do you have room in your heart and your home for a child in need? Contact us today to take the first step toward making a lasting difference in a child's life.

For more information or to attend an orientation, call or go online:

Resource Foster Care

661-631-6204

Toll-free: 888-362-6673

Adoptions

661-631-6006

www.KCDHS.org



Kern County Child Protective Services

100 E. California Ave.
Bakersfield, CA 93307

*Report suspected child abuse or neglect
or file a complaint.*

24-hour hotlines

Bakersfield: 661-631-6011
Ridgecrest: 760-375-6049
Toll-free: 877-233-0073



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ADOPTIONS

CAN I BE TOO OLD OR TOO YOUNG TO ADOPT?

An adoptive parent must be at least 10 years older than the child they are wishing to adopt. Many grandparents and retired people are also adoptive parents. There are as many teens in foster care as younger children, and they need loving, adoptive homes, too.

DO I HAVE TO BE WEALTHY TO ADOPT?

No. While independent adoptions through a private agency generally cost thousands of dollars, the fee is waived for adoptions through the Kern County Adoption Agency.

DO I NEED TO BE A LICENSED FOSTER PARENT IN ORDER TO ADOPT?

All adoptive parents must be licensed or certified foster parents or approved relative caregivers.

IS FINANCIAL OR MEDICAL ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE?

While prospective adoptive families need to be self-supporting, most children adopted through Kern County are eligible for financial assistance and Medi-Cal through the Adoption Assistance Program. Assistance is based on need and may continue until the child is 21 years old. Post-adoption services, such as counseling, case management services, crisis hotline and support groups, are also available to adoptive families.

Here's how
to get started!

Step 1: Attend orientation

Get an overview of the resource foster and adoption processes and pick up an application packet. Orientations are held in English and Spanish. For more information, call **661-631-6204**.

Step 2: Submit application

Within six months of attending orientation, you must submit a completed application. You are required to complete a background check, health screening, CPR and first aid certification.

Step 3: Attend PRIDE training

You must complete 27 hours of Parent Resource Information Development and Education (PRIDE) training. You'll learn about foster care, early childhood development and trauma-informed care.

Step 4: Home visit and license

A Social Worker will visit your home to help make sure your home is a safe environment for children.

Step 5: Placement of a child

You decide what type of placement your family is interested in receiving. There are three different options:

EMERGENCY CARE: Emergency foster parents provide a temporary safe haven for children. The children typically stay for a few days to a few weeks, or sometimes longer if a permanent home isn't available.

RESOURCE FOSTER PARENT: Children in need of a nurturing home while reunification is sought with their family are placed in foster homes. Placements may last a few weeks or years, depending on the circumstances.

ADOPTIVE PARENT: If it is determined that a child will not reunify with his or her parents, the child will be placed in an adoptive home. Additional requirements are in place for parents who choose to adopt.