

"You never stop thinking about wanting to belong to a family."



Colleagues at DCF partner-provider The Village for Families and Children (The Village) say their associate Vice President of Permanency, Thomas "TJ" Michalski, is the real deal - he "walks the walk" so to speak. Not only in his day-to-day work of placing the children they serve in safe, stable and permanent homes, but also in his personal life. That is because, in addition to doing this work for over three decades, TJ is father to an adopted son and three biological children as well as being a current and former foster parent.

Join Them Where They're At

TJ's specialty? Over the years, he has learned to build rapport with youth he works with and fosters by opening up a line of real communication and allowing them the grace to try, fail and succeed.

"I find that as a foster parent, if we show interest in them and join them where there at, and what their interests and talents are, then they're more apt to listen to us, our guidance, things that we're teaching them, TJ stated.

That is something TJ affords all of his children because regardless of age children need to know they have a safety net - a supportive adult or adults in their life - to branch out and find themselves.

"With my kids, they always knew they had a safety net. Our kids can't try things if they don't feel like they have a safety net."



Every age has its own challenges, however, older children are able to communicate their needs much better than a younger child. TJ said good communication between a foster parent and teenaged foster child can lead to the development of a unique relationship that cannot always be achieved with a younger child. In turn, that stronger bond makes it much easier to help the youth with their transition to adulthood.

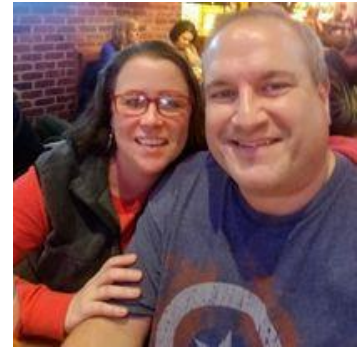
Teenagers In Need of Safe, Loving Homes

TJ said the need for safe, loving foster homes for youth has always been great but most especially for youth ages 13-17.

Why are older children - adolescents aged 13 to 17 - often overlooked in the permanency placement process? It could be that many prospective foster and adoptive parents opt for

placements of younger children because of the preconceived notions of the "baggage" teenage years may bring to a home. TJ said, at any given moment, The Village has 15-20 kids in need of families and they are typically teenagers.

The data backs that up. Of the nearly 2,300 Connecticut adoptions that have taken place since 2019, slightly less than 250 have been adoptions of teenagers aged 13-17. That is true nationwide. According to the U.S. Children's Bureau, more than one in five children waiting for adoption are aged 13-17.



"Teenage years scare people but for me, when I look back at my teenage years and those of my children, they're also some very wonderful years. Participating in sports and after school activities, teaching them life skills, and just how to function is rewarding in itself and it's fun to do." TJ added.

One major difference between fostering teens versus toddlers or infants is that foster parents do not have to pull all-nighters or change diapers. It is a whole different stage of parenting that is instrumental as teens are maturing into young adults.



Through foster care and adoption, national and state child wellbeing jurisdictions have focused their efforts on stability and permanency for teens before they "age out" of care and custody.

In this photo, TJ shares that call to action in an interview with WFSB.

"There's lots of reasons behind [children being placed into the care and custody of DCF]. But the one thing all kids need is a family to take them in and understand them. And not get overreactive to behaviors or things that go up because that's true for every one of kids - certainly every one of my kids - and helping them through those challenges," he stated.

What would TJ say to prospective foster parents about why they should open their minds and homes to teens? TJ uses the example of his own teenaged foster child.

"If I was able to open minds then I'd be a lot more successful," TJ jokes. "But what I would say is that foster care brings with it so many opportunities. We currently have a foster child who's a teenager- he's seventeen. He has so many talents and interests. He's really into photography and so great at it. He's really musical and taught himself piano and cello."

Perhaps a child who was placed in foster care because of substance misuse or intimate partner violence may mirror some of those behaviors. However, TJ and other adoptive and foster parents interviewed on this in the past have said that, with love, understanding and no judgments, they found the opposite to be true.

Overall, the feedback is that the experience is rewarding for all parties. Similar to younger youth in care and custody, teens are just big kids in need of a loving forever home - a safe place to be.

You Never Stop Thinking About Wanting to Belong to a Family



The U.S. Children's Bureau states that, while adoption and foster care are legal procedures, both are moreover a "social and emotional process."

At a practical level, TJ agrees. He said he often gives foster parents he works with the following advice.

"I think that teenagers get a bad rap. So many foster children [already feel like they] live on 'thin ice.' I tell foster parents all the time that the minute they say to their foster child that you cannot live here if you do XYZ then foster children, especially adolescents, know that life in this home is tenuous and contingent on something even if they do not know what that something is."

TJ likens it to a marriage that is on the fence. The minute you question your commitment to the relationship you know that the relationship is not on solid ground. The same applies to when an adult uses their foster child's status in their family as a threat. That child, especially if they are old enough to read between the lines, receives that message and knows their status in the home is "tenuous and contingent." They begin to question their foster family's commitment to them.

Again, TJ said in ways it is similar to parenting a toddler.

"They try things and may mess up, but the important thing is you cannot be too judgmental. The same thing applies to teens. Show me a kid who hasn't ever had behavioral issues."

While TJ is still getting to know his current foster son Anthony, a teenager, he said he and his wife reiterate to Anthony that he is welcome in their home, and they want him to be part of the family. In his profession and in his own home, he has seen youth transform just because a supportive adult in their life has provided a little bit of grace and understanding, a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on. It has made all the difference in their lives.



Any additional advice from one foster parent to another?

TJ said that if a foster parent is just treating a placement in their home as a "job" then they are focused on the wrong thing. No matter what, "when you commit you commit."

"It doesn't matter the age, kids need to feel they're loved and that they're wanted. That's the human condition. We all need that."

The youth TJ and his wife have fostered tended to be older youth. In fact, his former foster son, now his adopted son, had been in his life since he was nine years old and into his early twenties after he had aged out. TJ and his wife made it official when he was 25 years old after the young man asked TJ why he had never adopted him.

That reminded TJ that, "You never stop thinking about wanting to belong to a family."

TJ says his adoptive son is family and they remain in close contact just as TJ and his wife do with their adult biological children.

"My adoptive son took our last later in life and has been part of the family for all the holidays and everything. We adopted him, he took my last name. We're so proud of him. He's successful, has his own business and wife and kids of his own," he stated.

Remaining In Contact with the Birth Family

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foster son's family over for a meal.

Connecticut practices the values of the Quality Parenting Initiative and encourages licensed caregivers to engage with the child's birth family. TJ said there are more pros than cons to establishing these relationships and he recently had his

"When you accept their family for who they are there's no fighting. It's like a blended family [when you raise and care for children who aren't biologically your own]."

Other foster and adoptive parents have expressed similar sentiments. You should always know your roots, where you came from. Those roots are always going to be part of you and part of your life. Even if it is not "part of who you are" per se for youth emerging from particular traumatic home lives, those familial roots are fundamental to one's development into adulthood.

TJ likens staying connected with a foster youth's biological family to his own experience.

"I'm a social worker for sibling groups. And I have a strong relationship with my own siblings. I come back to the fact that at the end of the day, for better or worse, siblings are the most significant relationships you can count on in your life."

TJ used the example of adult siblings needing to have end of life conversations regarding their aging parents, "Siblings pull together in those situations."

Making a Difference in Someone's Life

Prior to joining The Village, TJ carried out foster care and post-adoption services programs at Casey Family Services. In his current role, he works with youth and their families to give them the skillset to launch into adulthood as thriving, self-sufficient individuals.

In his profile on The Village's website, TJ answers the question of 'what would you most want the clients of The Village to know about you?,' "Regardless of your life circumstances you have value and you can change your life's path! I hope we can play some small role in helping you achieve that goal!"

That is a mantra reflected as TJ "walks the walk" in both his personal and professional life.

Interested in becoming a foster or adoptive parent? Please contact 1-888-KID-HERO and visit [CT Fosters: Foster Care & Adoption Services](#).