

**Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to speak today.**

I am a foster parent and an early childhood special education teacher specializing in birth-to-three development in central Kansas. In my profession, I am no stranger to the challenging home environments many children in our state endure. I have filed numerous reports with DCF, many for the same child/family, and often wondered why no action was taken. Becoming a foster parent gave me a firsthand view of the stark imbalance in the child welfare system, where parental rights often take precedence over the well-being and rights of children. This experience has deeply influenced my awareness of the pressing necessity for transformation. I realize that it takes severe neglect, abuse, and significant safety concerns for DCF to remove a child from a home. I have found myself questioning—if the circumstances were that severe initially, why are so many children returned to those same environments?

I recently came across a social media post listing ways that being a foster parent can break you. Two statements stood out to me:

*"It will break you when you watch a child finally feel safe enough to sleep through the night, only to be ripped from your arms and placed back into chaos."*

*"It will break you when you're sitting in a courtroom, listening to people in suits decide a child's future as if they were handing out traffic tickets."*

Before court hearings, I spend hours preparing detailed reports to give the court a clear understanding of each child's situation. I submit these reports—along with therapists' letters, outpatient therapy progress notes, and school information—at least two weeks before the hearing to ensure everyone involved has ample time to review them. My goal is to highlight each child's strengths and challenges, as well as any observations or concerns I have regarding the case's progress. I describe each child's personality and the things they love to do. I describe the significant behavior changes in my foster children that correlate with visitation schedules. For example, I have seen a child exhibit extreme aggression, elopement, self-injury, and an inability to tolerate challenging circumstances when visits are frequent. This child spent a majority of waking hours angry and screaming. When several weeks went by without visits, that child transformed. They were able to learn and utilize calm down techniques, use words to communicate, and persist when things got hard. Waking hours were suddenly spent with laughter instead of screaming! The child was happy! When visits picked back up again, the child reverted right back to the extreme behaviors. The cheerfulness was diminished once more. Young children and children with delays, often lack the ability to use words to describe what they are feeling. Instead, they use actions. It is the job of the adults in a child's life to interpret what their actions are trying to say. In the case of the child above the message is clear: "visits with my birth family make me feel unsure, out of control, and scared." I would think that those tasked with making vitally important decisions about a child's future would seriously consider how a child's day to day happiness is impacted by visits. I would hope that information would be at the forefront of everyone's minds when it comes time to look at reintegration.

Unfortunately, I often sit in court hearings and hear very little information shared about my foster children—and when information is shared, it is often inaccurate or outdated. Rarely do I

hear the judge or Guardian Ad Litem address the concerns raised in my reports or the therapists' letters. Decisions are made without considering the valid fears, thoughts, and opinions of the children. My foster children are not being properly represented in court, and their best interests are not prioritized. Instead, there is a disproportionate focus on whether a birth parent is completing case tasks, regardless of the minimal progress or effort. Often, these case tasks do not even address ways to support the child in healing from the trauma they have been through.

Research shows that the first five years of life are critical for a child's growth and development. Trauma experienced during this time may not be consciously remembered, but it has a serious, lasting impact. Trauma on a developing brain can literally cause structural and functional changes. A child who has experienced early trauma often has lifelong challenges with cognitive skills and emotional regulation—both of which make school and independent living more challenging. The circumstances that land a child in foster care often mean they were being parented in an unpredictable way and likely did not form a safe and secure attachment with their birth parents. For very young children, this is especially damaging as their brains are learning what safe and secure attachments mean. They are at a crucial stage for being able to understand how to form healthy attachments. In many cases, the first adults to provide safety, stability and consistency are the foster parents. These young children, who are desperate for a sense of security, develop a safe and secure attachment with their foster parents—only for reintegration to occur. For many children, they are being removed from the only safe attachment they have ever known which can be even more traumatic than the initial separation from their birth parents.

Foster care cases can drag on for years before permanency is achieved. In some cases, birth parents make significant efforts to address where they went wrong and prove they are fit to parent. However, because court dates are spaced so far apart, it could still take a year for a child to be reintegrated. In other cases, parents make minimal progress every few months, but because it is still considered progress, the court continues to favor reintegration. It's important to remember that a child's perception of time is vastly different from an adult's. My current foster children are four years old and they have been in my care for two years. They have spent half of their lives creating a safe attachment with me rather than their birth parents. Finding permanency for these children should be a top priority, yet their next permanency hearing is not until January 2026.

I urge you to advocate for change in the foster care system, particularly in how reintegration is handled for children under five.

**First and foremost,** I urge you to pursue a solution that ensures Guardians Ad Litem have in-person meetings with the children on their caseloads. A child's age, abilities, or foster care placement location should never be a barrier to in-person contact. The role of a Guardian Ad Litem is to be the child's voice in court, and this cannot be adequately fulfilled without ongoing, direct interaction with the child.

**Secondly,** I urge you to pursue stricter adherence to the 15/22 rule outlined in the Adoption and Safe Families Act. Despite this requirement, many children remain in foster care far beyond 22 months before termination is seriously considered. For a child under five, that could mean spending half of their life in uncertainty. If a birth parent has not made substantial progress

within 22 months, is it fair to leave a child in limbo any longer, without a permanent and stable home?

**Additionally,** I urge you to strongly advocate for and monitor the adherence to House Bill 2075. At the time I am submitting this, I am unsure the status of this bill. Should it go into effect, I will be glad to see the courts be required to hold more timely permanency hearings. With that being said, the courts must take into account whether or not a parent is truly progressing. If they aren't able to make substantial progress in nine months will waiting another six months be guaranteed to make a difference?

**Lastly, and most critically,** I urge you to consider revising the legal language regarding reintegration versus termination for children under five. As previously mentioned, trauma at such a young age has lifelong consequences. However, providing a stable, structured, and loving home early on significantly increases a child's chances of healing and thriving. The sooner a child is removed from an unstable and harmful environment, the sooner they can begin the process of recovery. It is imperative that we prioritize a child's long-term well-being by making decisions that support their ability to heal and grow in a safe, stable, permanent home.

I understand that some birth parents are indeed capable of making timely and meaningful changes and reunification is a safe and viable option. Sadly, while many other birth parents may love their children deeply, they struggle with circumstances that make safe reunification next to impossible. I wholeheartedly support family preservation when real, lasting, and timely change is possible. The decision to terminate parental rights is not something to be taken lightly. However, when progress remains minimal and the clock keeps ticking, we must ask—why keep drawing the case out? A child's sense of safety, stability, and attachment cannot be put on hold indefinitely. The system frequently emphasizes “doing what is best for a child.” This statement must consider not only a child's basic needs, physical safety, and whether or not they are attending school, but also their access to resources that support their growth, healing, and overall well-being. It should address their day-to-day happiness and emotional stability. The rights of the child must be given equal weight to those of their birth parents.

Foster parenting may break me; it may leave me exhausted, heartbroken, frustrated, and repeatedly questioning the system. But I will keep going. I will continue to stand in the gap, to fight for the children who have no voice, because every child deserves a champion—someone who refuses to give up until they have the safe, loving, and permanent home they deserve.

**Thank you for your time. If anyone has further questions or comments, I would be more than happy to speak with you.**

Elisha Cairns

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