

**“You can’t let go until you cry.”
What foster care means to Nottoway couple**



Having no energy and not even wanting to get up in the morning was not like Sondra Duncanson. She knew something was seriously wrong. The doctor, probing for the cause, finally asked if there had been a death in her family.

No, Sondra replied, but a foster child she and her husband Greg had loved for five years just left. Could that be the problem?

“Well,” said the doctor, happy the mystery was solved, “go home and cry.” And she did!

Through the healing tears she discovered that it was OK to get attached, and it was OK to let go. This was her baptism into the heart that foster parents call home.

The Duncanson’s journey began when the ache of being childless just wouldn’t go away. Their marriage needed children to love. So they took a three year-old multi-handicapped child from the United Methodist Family Service. They believed their love was so strong that even this child could be made whole. And he would take the ache from their heart, they hoped.

For five years they struggled with his temper tantrums. It was like God had designed him for the sole purpose of frustrating them. School was impossible because his

behavior was so bad. “I just stood by the phone waiting for the school to call, and I would bring him out screaming and kicking,” said Sondra, who still looks back with sadness about this child that couldn’t respond to their love.

But the child did serve a purpose in their lives. A little boy who could not love taught the Duncansons about the real meaning of love. “We learned that love can’t fix everything. We really thought we could bring this child into our home. Our marriage was strong. Our faith was strong. We’re just going to fix everything, we thought. But it just doesn’t work that way.”

What they did learn was this: All you can do is be there for the child. You can’t replace their real parents. You can’t make a child into something he is not. And you can’t earn their love by buying them things.

The Duncansons learned that lesson with three siblings they took in. “The more I did, the more they wanted. I was going out and buying stuff, trying to be the great mother. The hardest thing is to give and give and not get anything back.” She remembered her Social Service worker telling her not to fall into that trap. But when it comes to the heart, you have to learn from experience.

And being a foster parent has restrictions regular parents don’t have. For instance, you can’t spank them, and foster kids seem to know that. “We had one little girl who was terrible. The first time we made her leave the table until everyone was finished (one of the few punishments they have), she stood on the stairs and hollered that she was going to tell the judge.” She was just six years-old.

But the Duncansons are getting something back—only it isn’t what they expected. Being a foster parent lets them feel the pulse of something bigger than a personal desire for their own child. Can you really own a child anyway? In God’s family, maybe there are just children, all equally in need of love. When their parents fail, God looks for sanctuary, a mother and a father He can depend on. That’s how the Duncansons have come to look on their role as foster parents.

“We feel like God’s blessed us with this place. We have plenty of room, plenty of beds We feel like we’re helping to keep a family together. That’s our reward. Kids belong with their parents.”

As the children come and go—nine so far—the Duncansons have discovered that their marriage has grown stronger. And life is never boring. You never know what a phone call will bring. Sometimes within a matter of hours they have a new child. They don’t know if it’s for a few days or a few years.

Choosing to accept each child as it comes along gives this couple a bond that those who aren’t foster parents find hard to understand. Their marriage has a meaning larger than their own needs.

When people say they couldn’t be foster parents, the Duncansons don’t know how to respond. They don’t feel they are doing anything extraordinary.

But they do know what the heart needs in order to give love. Foster parenting has given them a key to a profound truth. Instead of looking for someone to lock inside the heart, they just look for someone to pass through it. “It’s just something we do,” she said, having no other words to explain such a simple rule.

But once a child has passed through the Duncanson’s heart, the door is never shut. “The best part is being able to keep in touch,” she said. “One little boy calls me on the

telephone. It means a lot. They really haven't gone. We always tell them, "This is your home, too."

And then like every mother, she wonders if the the children will remember and come back with their children when they grow up.

"We'll have more children than we ever thought possible," she said, smiling when she realized that this was, indeed, the truth.