

# “Everybody has a way to impact the lives of kids in foster care”

A father who grew up in foster care talks about the value of hope.

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*"When I was growing up, all I needed was somebody to believe in me." Joe Toles is a school counselor, a licensed therapist, a father of four adopted sons, a philanthropist, a spokesperson—and a foster kid. "I grew up in foster care. I may be 59 years old, but I'll always be a foster kid," Joe says. He shared the following with the folks at [AdoptUSKids.org](http://AdoptUSKids.org) about the importance of raising awareness of foster care and the ways that each of us can help children and teens in care.*

## **You frequently talk with groups and the media about your life and your family. What motivates you to share your story?**

One of the big issues with foster care is a lack of awareness.

Society can only tolerate talking about it when there is a cape involved. We've got Robin, Harry Potter, Superman—all of these wonderful examples of adoption and foster care, but we can only deal with it when they can overcome it in such a miraculous way.

The reality is that most of us don't wear capes and don't have superpowers.

The closest that I come to having a cape is having an ability to speak up and help people understand and believe in the potential of children in foster care.

## **What surprises the people you talk with?**

Often I surprise them! When I give presentations with my agency, You Gotta Believe, and other organizations, I start with a case study of a child in foster care. I describe their life. At some point during the talk—after they have accepted me as a peer, as a colleague—I tell them that that child is me.

At that point I challenge them to believe in kids in foster care. Because when I was growing up in care, all I needed was somebody to believe in me. And I did, I had wonderful people that surrounded me—coaches, teachers, neighbors. And having them made all the difference in the world.

## **You adopted four boys when they were teenagers. They are out of the house, and you are in the process of adopting a 12-year-old boy. Why?**

It started with a call from my caseworker. I really didn't expect to adopt again. I joke with people that one of the biggest reasons is that now I can go see all the animated films I want to see and go back to the parks at Orlando!

Of course, there are rational reasons I could point to. I keep doing it because I get to see growth. Because I get to see and to feel appreciated—at least some of the time.

## **What have been the greatest rewards of adopting teens from foster care?**

Back to the cape analogy, people want to hear a success story. That my boys are off saving the world. I'll be honest. My kids are not all exactly where I would want them to be. That's not to say that any of them are in a bad place. None of them are. But they are all OK, they are all safe. They have a family. Because of them, I have a family. And most of the time, that is a good thing!

## **Final thoughts?**

Everybody has a way to impact the lives of kids in foster care. You do not have to adopt a child, or have them move in with you. Just be aware that kids are dealing with life the only way they can. Believe in them, support them, give them hope for the future.

One of my greatest influences was my high school track coach. I talked with him recently—he's 90 years old now. I wanted him to know what a difference he made in my life. You know what he told me? He said all he did was treat me the way I deserved to be treated. Isn't that what we should all aspire to do?