

What it's like to foster 115 kids

When I retired, I opened my house—and my heart—up to foster kids. I thought I'd try it out for a few years—five, tops. But I'm still at it, 115 kids later.

Marcy Perron, as told to Kate Rae

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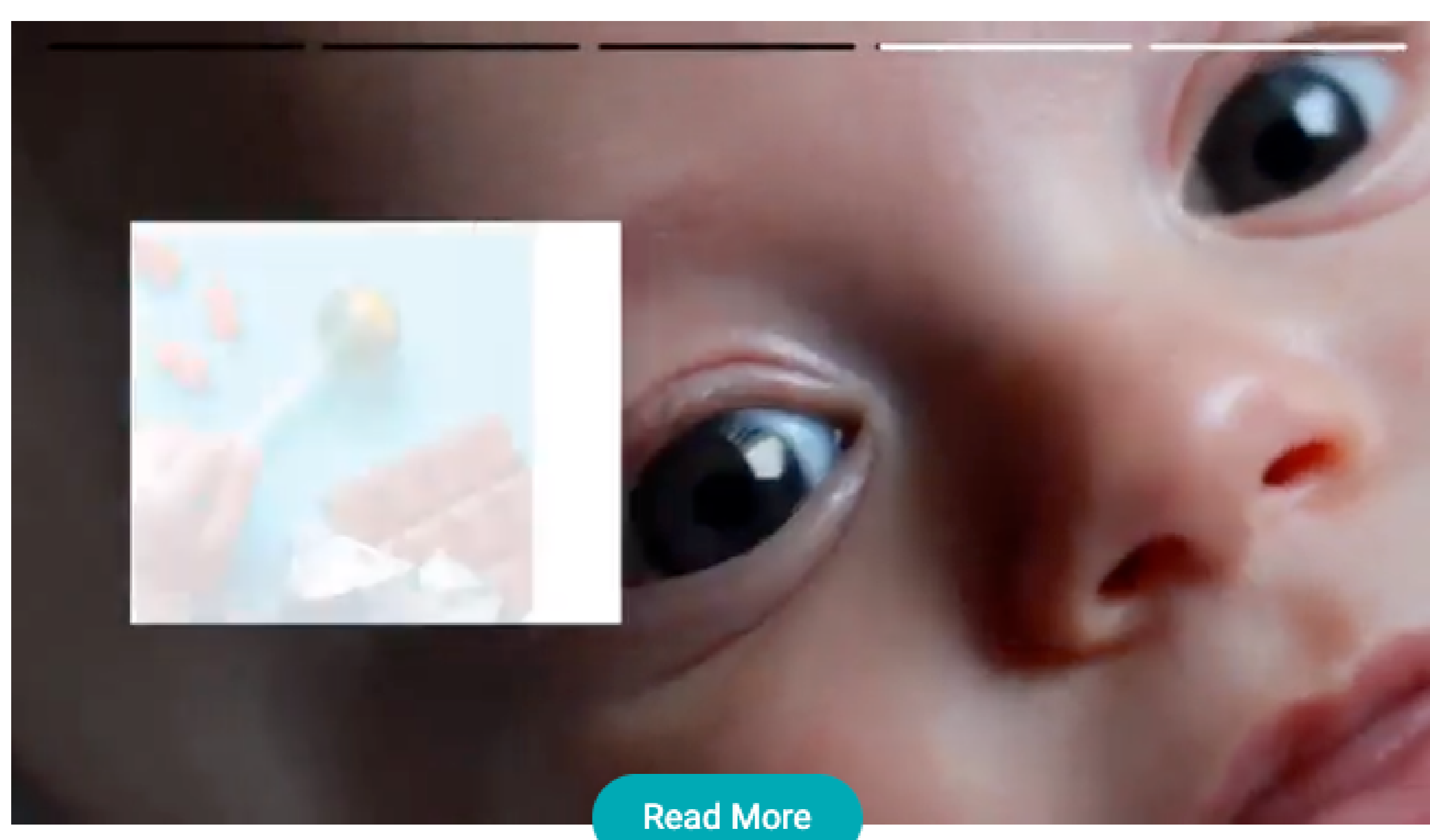


Photo: Stocksy

Twenty-three years ago, my daughter had just turned 19, and I got hit with a bad case of empty nest syndrome. My big house felt suddenly lonely, and after decades of working at a bank in a role that felt increasingly impersonal, I wanted a change. I had a client who fostered, and I thought, *Well, why not try it, at least for a bit?* I'd been thinking it was time to leave my job anyway, and I'd never had the chance to be a **stay-at-home mom**. So I did it. I retired on a Friday, and the following Monday, my first family of kids arrived.

I had no idea this world existed. I was brought up with *Happy Days* and family and friends and **camping and activities**. I quickly got an education in what life was like for these kids, who arrived at my door with a truckload of trauma. It was truly shocking at first. Nowadays, foster parents get hours and hours of training and education before taking in kids, but back then there was hardly any instruction (not that you can ever truly be prepared!). My home was suddenly chaos, with kids throwing things, breaking things and stealing things, and it was all incredibly overwhelming. They wouldn't sleep—and neither did I. There were a lot of tears. I was terrified that I was doing something wrong, that I was causing more damage to these kids, that I wasn't the foster parent they needed. One day, I reached out to my resource worker, who said, "Oh, this is all very normal! This is what you can expect now." That stabilized me. And it didn't scare me off.

Because I was alone in my big house, I was able to take in big families of kids—sometimes five or six siblings would appear, usually with a baby attached, sometimes with teens. (My house has been jokingly referred to as the **Birth Control** House, because I've had a lot of teen-newborn pairings—those teens leave with no delusions about what it's like to have a baby!) There are some teenagers you can parent and some super independent ones you can just house. But babies? Oh, babies keep me sane. They are the reason I keep fostering. They are simply all heart—both heart-filling and heart-wrenching. When I hold one, I just feel a smile in my entire body, starting in my toes and moving up. All you have to do is love them. The first time I held a foster baby, I thought, *OK, I'm here. This is what I do now.*



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I've since fostered more than a dozen babies, and most come to me when they're just a few days old, having been born addicted to drugs. Those early weeks are agonizing for them as they go through withdrawal. There's this animal cry they do, one I'd never heard before, and their little bodies go as stiff as a board. All you can do is hold them close, ideally **skin to skin**. In those moments, I know my only job is to do just that. I can't get upset, because they don't need the added stress of my feelings. These babies just need love and for you to care for them, to get them on a routine and to get them to understand that you will always pick them up.

The transition from foster care to an adoptive home (or back to the birth family) is very, very slow, with many visits and overnights before it becomes a reality. But still, when they leave, they cry. And you cry. It's not sad crying, necessarily. They're taking a piece of your heart, but that's a happy thing, because they're going to a family who'll love them just like you love them but as their own. There are heart-breaking moments—glancing at the back seat of the car and seeing their car seat or peeking in their room at their empty crib—but as soon as you're ready, another baby arrives who needs that love. It's a pretty good way to get over the pain. And all of my babies have gone to wonderful homes, and their parents send me updates.

One big advantage I have is that I am older—I'm almost 70 now. I just call myself Grandma, and that's an easy thing for kids to understand and less threatening to the biological parents, too. My role is clear—not just for the kids, but for me, as well. It's just my job to love them and care for them as a grandma would.

When I started to foster, I thought I'd try it out for a few years—five, tops. But I'm still at it, 115 kids later. The only time I took a break from fostering babies was when I had breast cancer about 10 years ago. As soon as I felt better, I was right back at it. This isn't something you can walk away from. Once you start, you're in it for good. Remember: Kids in foster care don't have anyone else. They don't have an aunt or grandpa to take them in. Kids who have family stay out of the system. For a lot of these kids, I'm all they have. My older kids have invited me to graduations and weddings. I send birthday cards and Christmas presents every year. I sign them all "Love, Grandma."

Kelowna, BC, foster mom Marcy Perron has spent every minute of her retirement caring for kids.