**Food Fighting” Foster Care’s Never-ending Struggle with Food**

**By:**[**Karla Marie Williams**](https://www.fosterfocusmag.com/writers/karla-marie-williams)

“Mom, when you hide food from me to keep me from hoarding food, aren’t you in fact…. HOARDING FOOD?” I thought to myself, “Idiot, what are you doing?” Hearing my child say this made me realize that everything we were doing was perpetuating our children’s fear. My husband and I adopted 6 precious children. We thought we had it all figured out. We were doing what we needed to do to fix this problem of food hoarding. A few of our children experienced much more trauma than others and the evidence of it was showing even years later. I was worried. I was confused. I was frustrated. They are safe now and they have everything they need to thrive. Food was coming up missing in massive quantities. We were finding extremely creative hiding places for the evidence. We were furious. “We don’t teach you to steal!” “That is not proper behavior!” We had no idea what to do or how to handle our child’s need to hoard and take food. We slowly began to understand that this was not a “stealing” issue. Our child was not trying to take anything from the rest of the family. This was purely an innate reaction to fear, not even they understood. Going back 8 years, I began to put together the pieces of what we were now seeing. Rereading all my early reports that we received on our precious babies, things became clear. My sweet little child had been deprived of any solid foods for the first two years of life. Laid in a bed and fed a bottle of water and left alone for hours or even days. As a mother now, I cannot even imagine a child surviving that. So even though we now understood the why, we still did not know the how. How do we help our child work through this fear into freedom? Will there be a day that the paralyzing fear of not having your basic needs met ever be quenched? My child was 3 when the adoption was final. Our baby turned 11 recently and we are still fighting this fear.

Seventy-three packages of fruit snacks were hidden under the bed, in toy boxes and in closets. Over one hundred Slim Jim’s were hidden in the closets, drawers, heating vents and planted in other siblings’ rooms. After adopting our first three children in 2006, we brought home 3 more blessings in early 2013. I must admit it never crossed my mind that one child’ s trauma and past would be a trigger to another’s. We arranged the rooms according to age and gender and decorated with the best of the best. Within two months we began to see odd eating patterns. A few of the kids were not eating like normal. Later it was discovered that they were saving their food. Together they devised a plan to save, transport, hide and split their spoils in their room. This went on for quite a while before we caught on. One day as I was spring cleaning I found one wrapper, then 2, then 10, then molded orange peels. “Go up to your room and reveal to me where you have all of the food hidden immediately!” What we found was amazing! I was dumbfounded at their creativity, yet angry.

How can a child that has been in a stable loving home for 8 years with all their needs and desires met, NEED to hoard food? The answer is complex and simple all at once. This fear and need to gather was hard wired long before we met them. All our children endured circumstances of neglect before coming home where many of their basic needs were not met. We became increasingly concerned when we noticed non-food items were being eaten as well. We found chewed up toilet paper, plaster, plastic, yarn, rubber, pencils and more. We knew we needed to help them but did not know what to do. In the beginning we did it ALL wrong. Many parents are doing the same things.

We did everything we could think of to stop this madness. Here are the things that DID NOT WORK! Punishment unrelated to the actual offense is counterproductive. The child is not going to stop hoarding because you dish out heavy punishments. Punishment only treats the symptom of the problem, but never gets at the issues that cause the behavior. It also puts a wedge between you and your child which does not help with bonding. This was the worst thing ever. Time-out, losing privileges and being sent to their room was not the answer and it caused my relationship with my children to drift apart. That is not what I wanted. ***Locks***-What is this, a prison? No, it is a home. The fact that we thought this was going to solve the problem is laughable in hindsight. What are locks for? To limit the access to something we deem valuable. Why does my child have this issue in the first place? In their early years, they did not have access to the nutrition and care they needed. Many foster and adoptive homes use this as a method to stop the hoarding. All it does is keep them from taking food, but it does not help them deal with the trauma related behavior and heal. After all, healing is what we want, right? My children were hurt by this and became more fearful as a result. Locking things up made their fear worse and their actions desperate.

What is food hoarding anyway? Hiding and stashing food with the fear that there will be a shortage or lack of access in the future. “Mom, when you hide food from me to keep me from hoarding food, aren’t you in fact HOARDING FOOD?” I was teaching my child to hoard food by hoarding it myself. That was such an eye-opening moment for me. My children became more creative and investigative. They always found what they wanted and when they found it, they cleaned it out!

This is just ridiculous. The kitchen is the hub of most American homes. It was exhausting trying to impose such a ridiculous thing. Banning a child from the kitchen is insane. At some point they will need to go in the kitchen. Trying to police such non-sense as a parent is putting yourself in prison. Just stop it! When you know better, you do better! Thankfully it did not take long for us to “get it”. When you have a child that is dealing with such fears and it is affecting everything in the home, you need to stop and evaluate the source. Only then can you come to a point of helping them. Sometimes the source of the tension is the parent. I know that is not easy to hear or accept, but it is true. Your reaction to this type of behavior or any other behavior can make or break the situation. No one is going to get it right 100% of the time. A good parent makes mistakes and says sorry a lot. They are also dogmatic about doing better next time the situation presents itself.

I had to apologize to my children for my response to the struggle they were having. I felt horrible that I did not see the issue for what it really was. FEAR! I took it offensively as if they were doing something to me. It was quite the contrary. One day I called them into the kitchen, and I had a talk with them about the issues we were having. It was heartfelt and it was the beginning of healing.

“I know that people have promised all of you lots of things and have not done them. I know that there were times when you did not eat and get the food you needed. It may not be easy to trust this mommy and daddy to do anything different. We promise you that you will never go without food. If you find it hard to trust us for the future, I ask you to do one thing just trust us today. Then when you wake up tomorrow, decide to trust us again. Let’s take it day by day by day. Can I get you guys to do that?”

Tears fell, a few smiled and few asked questions about food. I felt I had conquered my attitude regarding the situation and now I could help my kids with their issues. The things I suggest may seem simple and you may say won’t work. All I ask you to do is try them for an extended period. Don’t give up at the slightest relapse. Let’s look at some things that can help your child through this very rough spot. You will find the answers are much closer than you ever imagined. Right in the kitchen! The first thing we did was take all the locks off the snack cupboards, stopped hiding (hoarding) food from them and lifted the kitchen ban. This helped take away a lot of fear and stress on everyone in the home. The last thing we wanted to do was add to the trauma they had already suffered before joining our family.

We have a way of handling snacks in our home that gives them freedom, choices, and power over what they eat and when. We have 6 snack sacks hanging on the wall in the kitchen with each of their names on them. They are filled after breakfast every day with a rotating group of snacks. They can have these snacks at any time of the day as well as an unlimited number of assorted fruits from a bowl on the counter that is refilled daily. We always make sure that the snacks we choose are healthier choices and not junk. Having unlimited fatty and sugary food available will cause an entirely different food issue.

Recognizing the triggers that your kids have is half the battle. You will begin to notice that you can set a clock by your child’s responses to life circumstances. Prepare accordingly to help them through it. Hoarding only takes place in secret. When you notice your child drawing inward and away from you and the family, those may be the best times to draw them closer to help them learn coping skills such as trust and communication. The more I started to use the “time-in” technique with my kids when they were having trouble, they had less time to meditate on and act upon those lurking fears.

Once we got our children involved in the kitchen, many of their fears diminished. From grocery shopping, putting the food away, helping to plan menus, preparing food with parents and choosing their own snacks gives them the power they need. They will begin to see that even when food is getting low, you faithfully replace it. Our child that dealt with this fear the most is actually becoming quite the little chef. We watch cooking shows together and dream up new dishes. She is starting to look at food differently.

Children should not be punished or shamed because of this behavior. It will cause them to become more secretive and bitter. However, there should be consequences for behavior that affects others in the home. If a child is taking a majority of a certain item from someone else, a consequence is in order. We have made them do other’s chores or they miss out on that one item the next time snack bags are filled. Healthy and just consequences are the key. Never shame, punish or deal with them out of anger. Our kids always feel free to make mistakes and know that they will still receive the love they deserve.

Talk to your child. Many times, the things we think are bothering them are far from the real problem. Develop a rapport where they feel comfortable talking about their feelings instead of eating them. Your children should be confident in your desire to provide what they need. I am embarrassed to admit that our kids were afraid to ask for more food at the table. We cannot remember when or how we gave them that impression. Not anymore. Asking for seconds at dinner should not be a scary event. We tell our kids to speak up and ask for what they want. Now they know they are free to get more and enjoy their meals without fear. Completely deflect attention from the issue. Don’t continue to point it out or harp on it constantly. It may take weeks, months or even years for them to turn the situation completely around. Your job is to help them understand the source, provide support, and help them manage the fear. There are adults that still must discipline themselves to move past these issues due to childhood fears. It takes time and support! We address the issue and move on. They have no reason to be ashamed.

Sometimes you are doing all the right things and the progress is very slow. There may be a need for a third party to see and perceive things you cannot. This is especially necessary if your child is consuming non-food items. I always suggest play therapy for younger children. A therapist that shares your values and has experience in foster care, adoption and trauma would be best. If you feel more comfortable, ask to be a part of the therapy with your child. We did this and are very happy with the results. There is hope! This behavior is very common in children who have been neglected. It takes time to help them through it and to rid their little hearts of that fear. I am thrilled with the progress my children have made. Most of all, the changes that we made as parents have made the biggest and most dramatic improvement. It is important to deal with the issues your children have but the most important thing is to maintain a loving and supportive relationship. You are just the parent for the job.

**Between Families Newsletter**
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**2022**

**PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ½ HOUR CREDIT.**

1. (True/False) Punishment only treats the symptom of the problem, but never gets at the issues that cause the behavior.
2. When you have a child that is dealing with such fears and it is affecting everything in the home, you need to stop and evaluate the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
3. .No one is going to get it right \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of the time.
4. What was one way of handling snacks that Mrs. Williams used?

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1. (True/False) Recognizing the triggers that your kids have is half the battle.
2. What are ways to involve kids in the kitchen?
3. Meal planning
4. Grocery shopping
5. Choosing snacks
6. All of the above
7. (True/False) there should be consequences for behavior that affects others in the home.
8. Your job is to help them understand the source, provide support and help them manage the \_\_\_\_.
9. This behavior is very common in children who have been \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**ANSWERS IN RED:**

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2. When you have a child that is dealing with such fears and it is affecting everything in the home, you need to stop and evaluate the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**Source**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
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\_\_\_\_\_\_**Any answer**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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