

Angels Watch Over Santa Barbara County Foster Children

Santa Barbara Family Life

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I'll never forget the moment I first held our foster daughter," reminisces former Angels foster parent Lia. "She was sound asleep, wrapped in a yellow blanket, and tears came to my eyes thinking about the connection we would have for the rest of our lives. My husband and I didn't hesitate to commit to fostering her, and we've never looked back."

Lia and Dean became certified foster parents through Angels Foster Care of Santa Barbara, an independent, nonprofit foster family agency that began placing babies in September 2006. "We read about Angels Foster Care and were touched by the program," says Lia. She and her husband Dean already had a young daughter of their own. When they weren't able to have a second child they decided to explore foster care. Now almost 4, Emma joined their family when she was 10 days old, and was adopted by the family after 18 months of foster care.

Angel recruits, screens and trains foster parents from Santa Barbara County to care for infants and toddlers who have been detained locally by Child Welfare Services due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. Since operations, Angels has placed 85 babies and toddlers in Santa Barbara County homes.

Angels Foster Care was established to offer quality foster homes and stabilize babies so they can learn to bond and attach as infants and toddlers, which allows them to form healthy attachments later in life. The agency typically places infants and toddlers who are entering foster care for the first time. Numerous studies speak to the importance of infant attachment, which occurs when a child bonds to a consistent set of caregivers during the first 24 months of life.

"We had a great experience and were so fortunate that Emma was able to permanently join our family," explains Lia. "Foster care is a different path to adoption. We feel so lucky to have her and she's lucky to have us. We're just a regular, happy family now."

The Angels program seeks foster parents capable of providing a nurturing, stimulating and environmentally healthy home. Special emphasis is placed on bonding and helping children reach their developmental milestones. Angels foster parents take only one child (or sibling group) at a time, have a full-time parent in the home and agree to keep the child until reunification with the birth parents or adoption occurs. A 12-month commitment is usual, which allows the child to have stable care and prevents movement within the foster care system.

Certified families choose whether to accept placement to foster, or to foster with the intent to adopt. While taking care of their child, Angels families work with Child Welfare Services to support the reunification with their child's birth parents. More than half of Angels children are eventually adopted by their Angels families.

When in car, the child flourishes from the stability and affection offered by the Angels foster family. Meanwhile, the birth parents are given 12 months by the court to correct situations and behaviors that allow them to safely parent. During this process, the child meets with his or her birth parents during supervised visits. Foster and foster-to-adopt parents may choose to meet the birth parents or remain anonymous as their child's case progresses through the court system, which typically resolves within one year.

Since the process of foster care and adoption can often be complicated, Angels Foster Care was created on a mission of service. The agency provides its foster families with weekly visits from a licensed social worker; offers monthly support groups, training and education programs; provides referrals for treatment and therapy; facilitates visits with a child's birth parents; attends all the child's court hearings; and supplies the foster family with regular updates about the child's case status.

"We're very proud of the excellent service we provide to our babies and foster families," says Angels Executive Director Meichelle Arntz. "We've recently opened offices in downtown Santa Barbara and Orcutt, which will provide better accessibility for our foster families both in north and south Santa Barbara County; particularly through our Angels support groups and training sessions."

"Angels redefines the concept of foster care," says Lia. "All of the Angels babies are happy and smiling – because their needs are being met. Angels gives people a new image of what it means to foster a child. Through the highs and lows, they always had our daughter's best interests in mind. They continually advocate for the child in the Santa Barbara County legal system where babies and toddlers often have very little representation."

Due to constant movement from home to home, children in traditional foster care often experience a disruption in care. Because Angels foster children are in a committed home for one year, their needs for bonding and attachment are met, and any services they might require are provided in a consistent and reliable way. This contributes to the child's normal growth and development.

"Angels walks you through the process, explains it well, and holds your hand along the way so you don't feel like you're walking into a dark tunnel," says Lia. "They tell you what will likely happen and how things work, and provide support through the whole process."

Every young person in foster care benefits from a meaningful connection to a caring adult who becomes a supportive and lasting presence in his or her life. Now is the time to get involved. If you can become a foster parent, you have the power to do something positive that will "change a lifetime" for a young person in foster care.