

Professional Development Tips for Those Who Spent Time in Foster Care

I started working in child welfare in my early 20s. It wasn't my original plan, but I found myself drawn to it after sharing my story of foster care and adoption at several public speaking events. Seeing people's reactions in those rooms and hearing them declare what they would change in their work, sparked a new passion for me. In the 15 years since, I've been in positions to make significant impact, and that impact sometimes came with a cost. If I could go back, here is what I would tell myself to help me make it through working in child welfare, mental health or related fields after surviving child welfare.



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1. Be prepared to widen your perspective without losing your story.

My early career centered around my story. Telling it is what led me into child welfare in the first place, and for a while it was the lens I used for everything.

In the first couple of years of my career, I was part of a youth speak-out group. For the first time, I was in rooms with other young adults who had gone through foster care and wanted to talk about it. It was powerful, and honestly, it was also overwhelming. Some drew conclusions from experiences like mine that I couldn't make sense of. Others had lived through things I couldn't imagine, and their stories showed me where my circumstances had been more fortunate. I'm not saying this to compare trauma. Hearing stories that challenged the meaning I had made of my life threw me off, and it took a few years to see the real lessons I could take from them. I wish I had been more open to sitting with my discomfort and figuring out its source.

Over time I learned to advocate from more than my own experience. I could speak to what I had lived and what others had lived, and that carried more credibility in the room. It also gave me some emotional distance. **I didn't have to relive my own story every time I pushed for change.**

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You are likely coming into this work to support healing, tackle the wrongs you experienced, or to increase access to the things that made your experience positive. You will meet people whose views shake what you think you know. Let them. Your story stays yours, and widening your perspective can create chances to build the connections that true systems-level change requires.

2. Decide on the boundaries you want around what you share, when you share it, and with whom.

In my early years I figured I had worked through enough of my childhood trauma to be fine stepping into professional roles addressing child trauma. Then I found myself in roles where I felt I had to share my story to have validity, and I noticed old behaviors getting triggered in new ways. People helped me learn how to share my story, but few prepared me to set boundaries so that my story wasn't all I contributed to the work. I didn't know I would need that.

Take time to think through what you're comfortable doing and saying, and where. If you're comfortable sharing your story, decide how often and under what circumstances. And ask whether the compensation is reasonable. Think about the kinds of work you can do without compromising your well-being. For example, I knew early on that I could not do work that involved investigating allegations of abuse because it took me too close to my past.

It's ok to change your mind, and it's ok to have conditions. **Being open to something in one situation doesn't mean you have to be open to it for everyone in every situation.**

Setting boundaries can be hard for those of us who came through care. Some of us experienced rejection early on and find it hard to say no. Or maybe saying no was never an option growing up. Professional work in these systems will ask a lot of you, and sustaining your work requires safeguards. Identify one or two people you trust to help you set your boundaries and stick to them. This could be family, friends, a mental health professional, or a mentor. Revisit them periodically to see if they need adjusting.

I started sharing my story as a public speaker at 18. By my early thirties I was psychologically exhausted. As uncomfortable as it felt, I started saying no to requests to share, and that boundary is still in place. It doesn't mean I never share. I'm just very conscious of when I do, and the reason must align with where I am at the time.

3. Know who is in your corner.

Like setting boundaries, identifying support systems can be challenging, especially if we have complex relationships with our families. Still, having people in your corner is crucial in this work. You will hear stories that trigger you and see the brokenness of the system in a new way. Sometimes it will feel like you're contributing to the very things you wish would change. People you trust to help you process it and ground you make a difference in staying in this work for as long as you want to.

When I worked in a program helping young adults transition out of foster care, a significant source of support came from my coworkers who also had lived experience. Our histories and the worldviews were different, but it still helped to work through situations with people who understood without a lot of explanation.

It also helps to have people who can pull you out of the world of child welfare or child trauma/mental health for a while. When you've lived the experiences that brought you into foster care and then work in that same or similar environment, it can start to feel like your whole world. That can lead to physical and psychological fatigue. **People who help you find joy in activities and hobbies outside your work and professional role give you the grounding you need to recharge and get back to work you're passionate about.**

Map out who you can go to for different needs. It can be hard but be open to noticing the gaps and finding realistic ways to fill them.

4. Invest time in gaining knowledge.

All systems addressing child trauma - from foster care to mental health to school systems are complex and frustrating to understand. As you begin your career, look for opportunities to learn the policies and system structures in place locally and nationally.

When I was starting out, I was great in conversations that called for personal experience, but I struggled to connect that experience to specific policies and practices. I went into my career believing everything in child welfare needed to change while being unable to name the specific parts I meant. Over time, mentors and opportunities to learn the complexities of child welfare strengthened my approach and got me into the rooms that mattered. Then I had to work through being tokenized. Having the ability to redirect those moments by pointing to real system issues gave me the confidence to boldly tell people that I was more than the stories I could tell.

Learning historical practices and emerging best practices and merging them with your experiences and the experiences of others who were in care, will make you a powerful advocate for the children and families you work with. It will also remind you that you belong in these spaces, even if you decide at some point to stop sharing your specific experiences.

Be kind to yourself.

This can be stressful work. It's even more so for those who come into it with a personal history. You will invest more because you know the consequences of not doing your best. That drive can push you to do good work. Left unchecked, it can become an unfair burden that you can't sustain.

If you take away only one thing, I hope it is this: **Be kind to yourself.** You deserve a fulfilling career where you are honored for all that you contribute. To ask that of others, you must start by believing it yourself. So set those boundaries, learn what you can, and make connections with people who will see you, uplift you, and ground you when it gets tough. And give yourself permission to put some of the burden down. It shouldn't be yours to carry.



Where in the World is Sue Badeau?



1: Badeau family RV.

After raising our lifetime family of 22 children, plus fostering many more, in Vermont and Philadelphia, my husband Hector and I sold or gave away everything we owned, bought a small (24 foot) RV and set out to explore the country, one campground at a time. We have met amazing people and had opportunities to both learn and teach about trauma, healing and hope along the way. Today, I write to you from Wakeeney, Kansas, not far from where Dorothy famously reminded us, *"There's no place like home."*

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In less than 2 weeks, our little RV will arrive back on the east coast, and I will be representing ATTACH at the Virginia Children's Services Conference in Roanoke. In the meantime, I would love to share a bit about how this lifestyle began and a few of our adventures.

When I was a little girl, my grandfather often babysat me when my parents were out. He loved watching CBS news, and I loved hanging out with my Papa, so I soon felt like Walter Cronkite was a friend, coming into our living room each evening. But my favorite part of the show was "*On the Road*" with Charles Kuralt. At that time, I had never travelled more than 50 miles from my home, and these segments gave me an up-close, personal and magical glimpse into the lives of people across the country as well as the wonder and mystery of road-trip travel. I was smitten and hoped that one day I would have my own motor home and travel the country just like Charles. Little did I know that more than 60 years later, that is exactly what I would be doing.

Today, my husband Hector and I live full time in our RV and travel back and forth, up and down across the United States. We have been in all of the "lower 48" states since starting this grand adventure during Covid in 2020 and we don't expect to stop anytime soon. Along the way we have had opportunities, just like Charles, to meet new people, see incredible landmarks, learn the history of all of the people and tribal nations that form this country, eat foods we never imagined, and see sunrises and sunsets in every corner of this land. We are able to arrange our schedule to spend in-person time with our now adult children and dozens of grand and great grandchildren who are scattered across the country, as well as popping in, at least once a year, to visit ATTACH's Minneapolis home base and spend time with Mary and Jenn.



2: Hector Badeau watching the sunrise.

We have seen evidence that child trauma is deeply embedded in every big city, small town and tribal nation in this country. We have heard the powerful and moving stories behind the visible, and most often not so visible, trauma wounds in young and old. And at the same

