



WELCOME TO
FOSTERING
AND BEYOND

Training

REALITY CHECK MANUAL FOR FOSTER CARERS

Hey, I'm Beth.

I'm not a social worker, a therapist, or someone who read about foster care in a training manual.

I'm a care-experienced adult — and I went through thirty-seven foster homes. Yep, 3-7.

That means I've had thirty-seven versions of "house rules," thirty-seven ways to stack the dishwasher, and thirty-seven different brands of shampoo that never smelled like home.

So yeah, I've seen it all: the good, the bad, and the "please tell me this isn't dinner."

I know what it's like to land in a stranger's house with a bag of clothes that don't smell like you, people trying to be kind but not knowing what to say, and that awkward silence where everyone's pretending this is normal. It's not.

But it can get better, and that's what this guide is about.

I'm not here to sugar-coat anything. Kids in care don't need pity. They need honesty, safety, and people who actually get that this isn't easy for anyone.

So if you're here to learn how to be the perfect foster carer — spoiler: that person doesn't exist.

But if you want to be a real one, someone who sticks around when things get tough and still cares even when the kid says they don't want you to — then keep reading.



BUCKLE UP

So, you've signed up to be a foster carer. That's amazing — really — but let's get real: you've just volunteered for the emotional equivalent of assembling IKEA furniture blindfolded while the instructions are in another language.

You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll question your life choices, and you'll find biscuits hidden in weird places. (Kids in care are professional snack hoarders. Comes with the territory.)

You're not just opening your home. You're walking into someone else's storm. And sometimes that storm walks, talks, rolls its eyes, and refuses to eat your cooking.

But here's the thing — that storm isn't against you. It's just trying to survive.



WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Okay, picture this:

You've just been dropped off at a stranger's house. You've got a bag full of stuff that may or may not fit, and everyone's smiling a bit too much.

Someone says, "Make yourself at home!" and you're thinking, Right, because that's totally how this works.

It's awkward. It's scary. It's alien.

Everything smells different — the food, the washing powder, even the carpet. Bedtime's different, mealtimes are different, the way people talk to each other is different.

You might be thinking, Well, I've made this house really nice and welcoming. And you probably have. But to that kid, it's still not home. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

They might miss people you don't understand. They might love their parents, even if those parents messed up badly. And that's not a betrayal of you — it's just loyalty to where they came from.

So when they seem cold, distant, or flat-out rude — that's not rejection. That's defense. It's a "don't get too close because everyone leaves eventually" kind of shield.



BEHAVIOURS & SURVIVAL

Let's be honest: kids in care can sometimes act like little emotional hand grenades. One minute they're fine, the next — boom.

You'll see things that make zero sense:

- ★ Meltdowns over the wrong cereal.
- ★ Silent treatment that could win awards.
- ★ Lies that are so bad they're almost creative.

Here's what's really happening — that kid's brain has been trained by chaos. They've lived in “fight, flight, or freeze” mode so long that calm feels suspicious.

So when they push your buttons, it's not because they hate you. It's because they're testing you.

They want to know: Are you going to give up like everyone else?

Don't match their chaos. Be the calm in the room. You don't have to be perfect — just predictable.

You don't need to “fix” them — just keep showing them they're not disposable.



THE LONGEST BUILDING PROJECT

Trust is not automatic. It's earned — brick by brick, moment by moment.

I didn't trust anyone for years. I'd say "thanks" while already planning my exit.

Because when you've been moved 37 times, you learn not to unpack — literally or emotionally.

Here's the thing though — eventually, someone stayed long enough for me to start believing not everyone leaves.

That's what you're doing, whether you realize it or not. You're showing up and staying when it would be easier to walk away.

Trust doesn't come with a dramatic movie moment. It shows up quietly — in eye contact, in laughter, in the day a kid finally tells you something that actually matters to them.

It's slow, it's messy, and it's worth every minute.



BELONGING

You don't have to replace their family — seriously, don't try. What you can do is make space for them to belong right where they are.

That means:

- Let them decorate their room, even if the color makes your eye twitch.
- Include them in “family” things without making it weird.
- Learn how they like their toast. It matters.
- Never talk about their story like it's gossip — that story is theirs, not yours to retell.

Belonging isn't about photo albums or matching pajamas. It's about a kid knowing they can breathe in your house without feeling like a guest.



COMMUNICATION

Some kids talk. Some don't. Some only communicate in grunts and sarcasm.

That's okay. Don't force it.

Golden rule: if you listen more than you lecture, you'll learn more than you expect.

Don't ask, "Why did you do that?" — because half the time, they don't know.

Try "What happened?" or "Are you okay?" instead.

And please, for the love of all that's holy, don't take things personally. Kids in care have seen a lot — they're not out to hurt you, even when it feels like it.



SELF CARE

Let's be real — this job is exhausting. There'll be moments you want to scream into a pillow, or hide in the car just to breathe. That doesn't make you a bad carer; it makes you human.

You can't pour from an empty cup — so fill yours. Get support, take breaks, vent to people who get it.

The calmer you are, the safer the kid feels.



RULES

Ah yes, house rules — the sacred list most carers think will keep the house running smoothly.
Here's the truth: rules are great — until they aren't.

When you've had a stable, calm upbringing, rules make perfect sense.
When you've bounced through chaos, rules can feel like traps.

I lived in 37 homes. You know what that means?
Thirty-seven different sets of "house rules."
Some places had charts, points systems, bedtime bells — one even had a "no talking after 8 p.m." policy (spoiler: that one didn't last).

Now, don't get me wrong — kids need boundaries.
They need to know someone's steering the ship.
But if you try to run your home like a military base, you'll lose that kid before you've even got to dessert.

Here's the deal:

Trauma doesn't play by your rulebook.

You might have a rule like,

"We all eat dinner at the table together."

Sounds nice, right? Family bonding and all that.
But to a kid who's used to eating alone, or who associates "family dinner" with shouting, that can feel terrifying.

You can invite them to the table — but if they need a few nights eating on the couch with headphones in, let it slide. That's not rudeness; that's survival.

Or maybe your rule is,

"Everyone's in bed by 9 p.m."

Totally reasonable.

Except some kids can't sleep because nighttime is when bad stuff used to happen.
So maybe you bend it a bit. Let them read. Sit with them. Give them some control over when the lights go off.

It's not about letting them "get away with things."
It's about teaching them that rules can be safe, not scary.
That adults can be firm, not controlling.
That structure can exist without punishment.



RULES

Think of it like this:

Rules are like elastic — they need some give.
If they're too tight, they snap.
If they're too loose, everything falls apart.

Your job is to find that middle ground — and it'll look different for every kid who walks through your door.

What worked for the 8-year-old last year might be a total disaster for the 14-year-old you've got now.
One size doesn't fit all — it never has.

A few things to remember:

- Be flexible, not flaky. Kids feel safer when you're consistent and adaptable.
- Explain, don't just enforce. A kid's more likely to follow a rule if they actually know why it exists.
- Pick your battles. The world won't end if they wear mismatched socks.
- Adjust as you go. What's chaos one week might be progress the next.

Rules should make your home calmer — not more stressful.
The goal isn't obedience, it's understanding.

Because when a kid in care sees that you can bend without breaking, they learn something huge:
“Maybe this adult won't snap on me when things get hard.”



CONTROL

Here's a hard truth:

Some carers mix up boundaries with control — and that's where everything starts going sideways.

Boundaries keep kids safe.
Control keeps you comfortable.
And the two are not the same thing.

You can have all the structure in the world, but if it's built on power instead of trust, you'll just end up in a constant tug-of-war with a kid who's already been through enough of those.

Let's break it down:

Boundaries say:

"I care about you, and I'm going to keep you safe — even when you're pushing every button I've got."

Control says:

"You'll do what I say because I'm the adult and I said so."

One builds safety.
The other builds resentment — fast.

When I was in care, I could tell the difference instantly.
Some carers used rules to make life calmer.
Others used them to prove who was in charge.
Guess which houses I didn't last long in?

Kids in care have had their control ripped away a thousand times.
They've been told where to live, when to pack, what to say, what not to say — sometimes even what to feel.
So when they sense you're trying to control them instead of guide them, they'll fight it. Hard.

And honestly? Fair enough.



CONTROL

Here's what healthy boundaries look like:

- You explain what's okay and what's not — *and why*.
- You hold the line when it matters (safety, respect, honesty).
- You pick your battles — you're not policing every eye-roll.
- You repair when you mess up. (Yes, adults mess up too. Own it.)
- You listen, even when they're being difficult — especially then.

Boundaries aren't about stopping behavior; they're about building trust. It's saying, "I'm not going anywhere, even when you're being a pain."

Control, on the other hand, sounds like this:

- "Because I said so."
- "My house, my rules."
- "You'll do it or you'll lose your privileges."

And look, sometimes you *will* have to pull the "because I said so" card — no one's judging.

But if that's your go-to parenting style, a kid who's lived through trauma will hear it as:

"You don't get a say in your own life. Again."

And that's the exact wound we're trying to heal.



CONTROL

The magic trick:

**Be the adult who keeps structure without crushing spirit.
The one who says, “I get you’re angry — but I still care.”
The one who sets boundaries and then holds them with
empathy, not ego.**

**You’re not their warden. You’re their anchor.
They don’t need someone to boss them — they need someone
to steady them.**

**Because when a kid realizes your boundaries aren’t there to
control them — but to protect them —
that’s when they finally start to feel safe.**



TESTING YOU

Let's just say this now: they're going to test you.
Every kid. Every time. No exceptions.

Doesn't matter if they're five or fifteen — they'll push, poke, and prod your limits like
it's a competitive sport.

And before you take it personally, remember: this isn't about you.
It's about what came before you.

When you've been through chaos, you don't believe "safe" just because someone
says it.

You believe it when someone proves it.

So that's what testing is — a safety check.

They're not asking, "How far can I go?"
They're asking, "Will you still want me if I go too far?"

What testing looks like:

- Saying "I don't care" when they clearly do.
- Ignoring every rule the minute you make it.
- Pushing you away right when you start to get close.
- Trying to get you to kick them out — before you get the chance to.



TESTING YOU

They're waiting for the moment you give up — because that's what people have done before.

They'd rather blow it up themselves than sit around waiting for the explosion.

How you handle it matters more than anything.

Here's what not to do:

- Don't scream, threaten, or go full power-trip. They've seen that movie.
- Don't take it as a personal insult — it's not about your cooking, your house, or your bedtime rules.
- Don't guilt-trip them with lines like, "After everything I've done for you..." That's not love — that's manipulation.

Here's what does work:

- Stay calm, even if they're losing it. (Fake it if you have to.)
- Keep your boundaries — no need to fold, just hold steady.
- Say what you mean, and mean what you say.
- Repair after conflict. ("We both got mad, but I still care. Let's start fresh.")

Every time you stay when they expect you to leave, something shifts.

It's not dramatic — you won't get fireworks or hugs.

But somewhere in that kid's brain, a new belief starts forming:

"Maybe not everyone gives up on me."



TESTING YOU

Testing isn't bad — it's proof they care enough to see if you're real.

If they didn't test you, it would mean they've already given up.
So when the eye rolls, the tantrums, the walls, and the silence start happening —
don't panic.

You're not failing. You're just being tested for trustworthiness.

And if you pass — again, and again, and again — that kid might eventually stop
testing and start trusting.

One last thing:

When you finally earn that kid's trust, it won't come with a Hallmark moment.
It'll come quietly — like when they ask your opinion on something small, or they
actually laugh at your terrible jokes, or they hand you their empty plate without
being asked.

That's not rebellion ending.
That's healing starting.



LOVE

Here's something they don't tell you at training:
Love in foster care doesn't look like it does in the
movies.

There's no soft music, no teary "thank you for saving
me" speeches, no magical breakthrough moment
where the kid finally hugs you in slow motion.

Real love in foster care looks like:

- Sitting in the car outside school while they refuse to
get out.
 - Staying calm while they tell you they hate you
(spoiler: they don't).
 - Making dinner they won't eat... again.
 - Saying goodnight even when they ignore you.
- Holding boundaries when you'd rather just give in.



LOVE

That's love. Not the shiny kind. The gritty kind. The kind that doesn't get applause.

Here's the thing:

Most kids in care don't trust "love."

They've seen it weaponized, withdrawn, or used as bait. So when you come along all kind and steady, their brains short-circuit.

"What's your angle? When do you flip? What's the catch?"

They'll test it. They'll reject it. And sometimes they'll break your heart trying to prove you'll break theirs first.



LOVE

But if you stay — not perfectly, not endlessly, just consistently — they'll start to believe you mean it.

Love doesn't always feel nice — and that's okay.

Some days love looks like walking away for five minutes so you don't lose your temper.
Some days it's admitting to your support worker, "I don't know what I'm doing."
Some days it's just keeping them alive, fed, and somewhat functioning — that's a win.

Love in care isn't about being adored.
It's about being trusted.
It's about becoming the first adult who doesn't vanish when things get messy.

Let's be brutally honest:

You might never get a thank you.
You might never get a hug.
You might never hear the words, "You helped me."

But one day, maybe years later, that kid might think of you when something good happens.
They might use the same calm tone you used when they talk to someone else.
They might make a decision that keeps them safe — because of what they learned from you.

That's love.
Quiet, stubborn, unglamorous love.
The kind that actually changes lives — even if nobody claps for it.



GIVING UP

At some point you'll hit that wall.
Not *if* — when.

You'll be exhausted, overwhelmed, and questioning every decision you've ever made.
You'll think, *I'm not cut out for this.*
You'll feel guilty for thinking it — and even guiltier when you secretly start Googling holidays you can't afford
just to fantasize about silence.

It's normal.
Seriously. Every good carer has been there — sitting on the edge of their bed, staring into space, wondering
how they ended up arguing about toothpaste with a 12-year-old at 10 p.m.

Here's the thing:

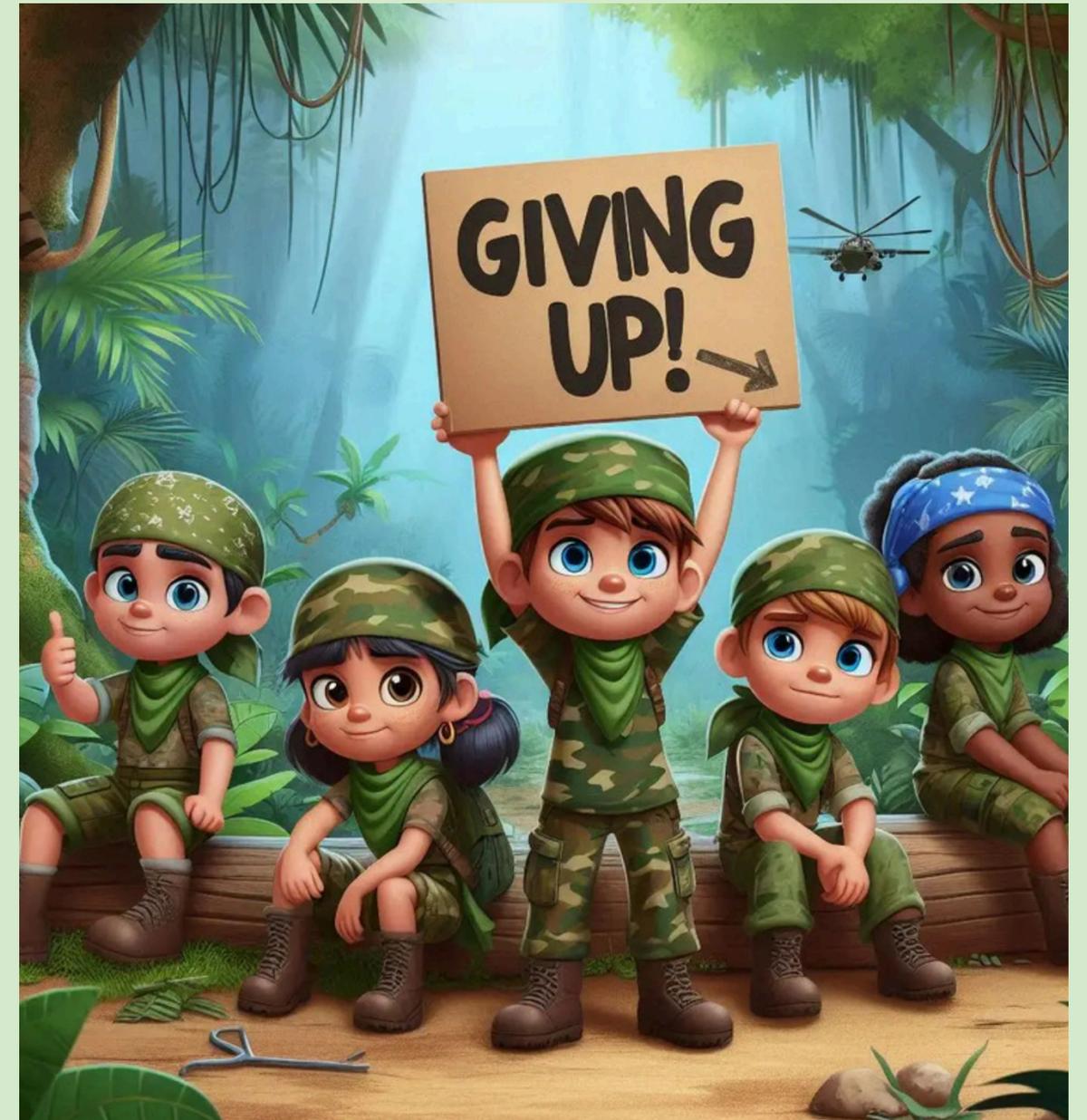
Caring for kids who've lived through trauma *will* bring out your own stuff.
They'll trigger old wounds, push limits you didn't know you had, and make you feel powerless in ways that are
hard to admit.

And then you'll get hit with that lovely thought:

"I can't quit — but I can't keep doing this either."

When that happens, stop pretending you're fine.
Reach out. Talk to someone who actually gets it — another carer, your support worker, anyone who won't
judge.

You can't pour from an empty cup.
You can't heal a kid's chaos if you're drowning in your own.



GIVING UP

Signs you're burning out (a.k.a. the slow unravel):

- You dread hearing them come home from school.
- You start resenting the sound of your own name.
- You fantasize about moving to a cabin in the woods — alone.
- Every problem feels personal.
- You're more tired after sleeping than before.

If that's you, it's not failure. It's feedback.
It means you need rest, not replacement.

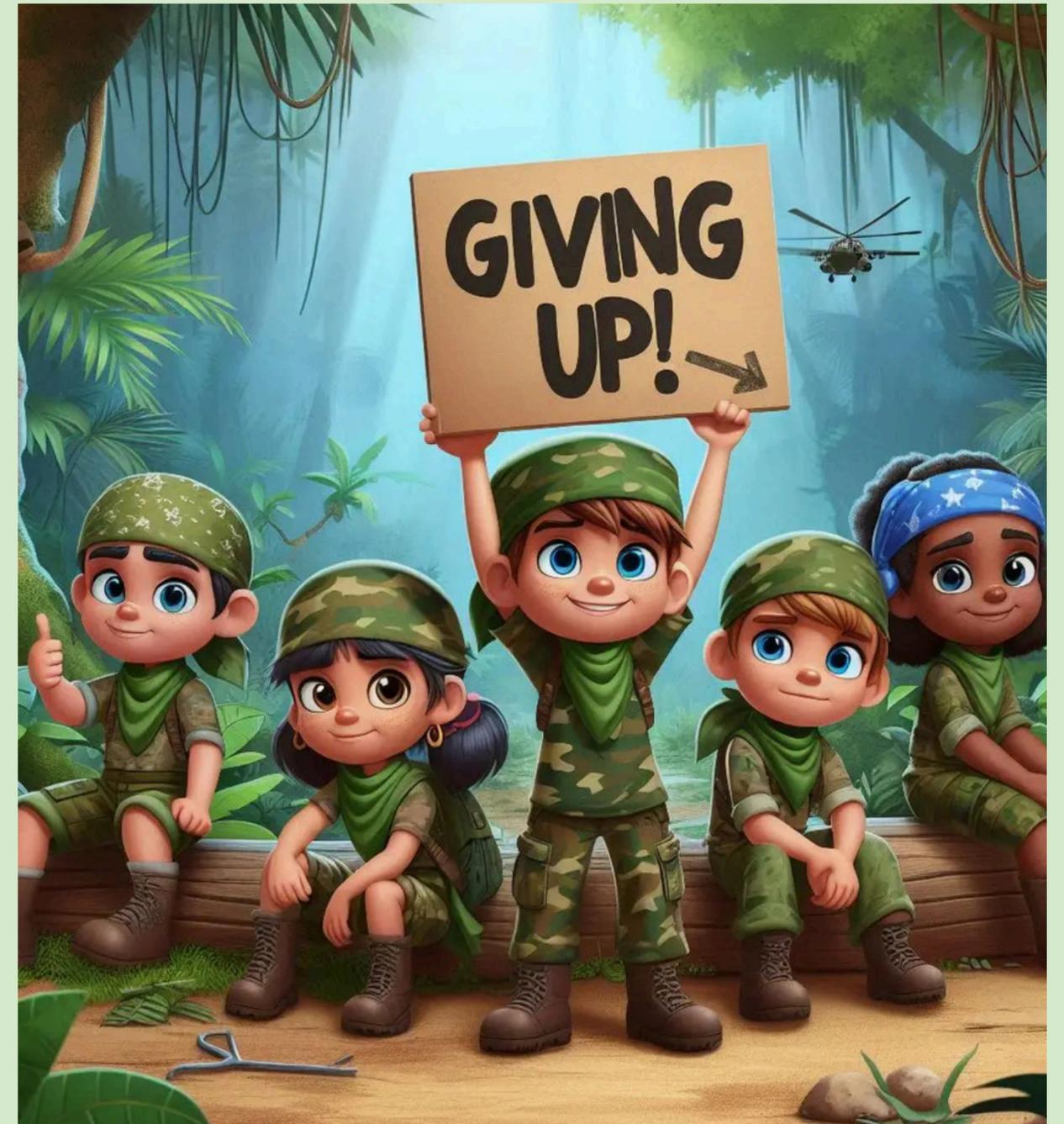
What helps (and what doesn't):

Helps:

- Taking real breaks — not "I'll rest while doing paperwork."
- Tag-teaming with your support network.
- Laughing — seriously, humour saves lives.
- Remembering that progress doesn't look pretty.

Doesn't help:

- Bottling it up.
- Comparing yourself to other carers.
- Pretending you're the only one struggling.
- Thinking love will magically fix everything. (It won't. Consistency might.)



GIVING UP

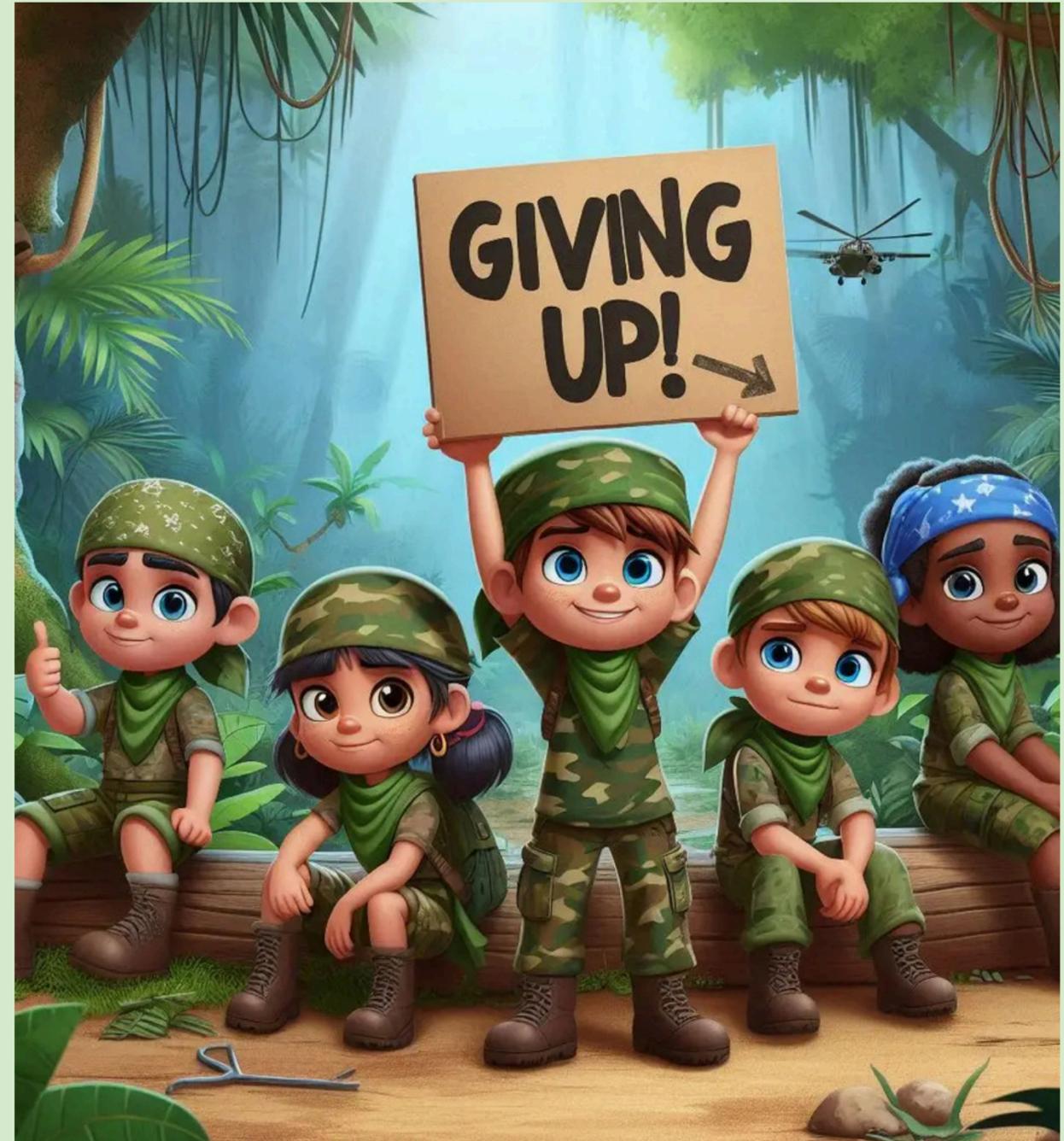
Here's what I learned after 37 homes:

The carers who made a difference weren't perfect. They lost it sometimes. They cried in the kitchen. They questioned everything.

But they came back.
They said, "Okay, let's try again tomorrow."
That's what mattered.

Kids in care don't need superheroes — they need stayers.
People who wobble, rant, take a break, then come back anyway.

If that's you — even on your worst day — then you're already doing better than you think



GOODBYES

No one warns you how weird the silence feels.
One day you're tripping over shoes in the hallway and
muttering under your breath,
and the next day — nothing.
No noise. No chaos. No “can I have a snack?” ten minutes
after dinner.

They've gone, and it hits you like a truck.

Even if you knew it was coming.
Even if it was a planned move.
Even if you thought you'd feel relieved.

Because sometimes you are relieved — and then you feel
guilty for that, too.

Welcome to the emotional hangover that is foster care.



GOODBYES

Here's the truth:

When a kid leaves, it's not just *them* packing up.
Pieces of *you* go too.

The routine changes. The house feels off.
You catch yourself setting an extra plate or hearing their laugh in your
head.

You start overthinking —

“Did I do enough?”

“Will they remember me?”

“Did I mess it up?”

Let me stop you right there: you did your best.
You showed up. You cared. You made it through days that would break
most people.

That matters — more than you'll ever know.



GOODBYES

Here's what happens next:

You'll feel everything — sadness, pride, worry, emptiness, maybe even anger.
It's grief, plain and simple. And you're allowed to grieve.
You're not being dramatic — you're human.

You built a bond, and then it ended. That's not small.

Some people will say, "Don't get too attached."
Ignore them.
If you didn't get attached, you weren't doing it right.

What helps (a bit):

- Talk about it. With other carers, friends, whoever will listen.
- Keep small memories — a photo, a drawing, something that reminds you of the good bits.
- Don't rush to fill the space. Let yourself breathe first.
- Remember: you were part of their story, and that doesn't disappear just because they've moved.

And if they keep in touch? Great.
If they don't? Still great.

Sometimes the impact you had isn't visible — but it's there, tucked away somewhere in how they start to believe that adults can care and stay.



GOODBYES

Real talk:

You'll miss them. Even the ones who drove you absolutely mad.

You'll wonder how they're doing, and you might never know.
That's the hard part.

But you also gave them something real — a moment of safety
in a world that wasn't safe.

That's huge.

So when the silence hits, don't see it as loss.

See it as proof that you loved properly —
enough for it to hurt when they go.



