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What to expect when you're adopting

Thousands of Canadian children are available for adoption, but negative public perception and a patchwork child-welfare system make it difficult to place them in loving homes. Meet Aleisha Deece-Cassidy, one of the rare kids who found a "forever family"

By Kate Fillion

[Comments \(11\)](#)

Aleisha Deece-Cassidy is alternately thoughtful and giggly, which is to say that she is a 14-year-old girl, the lively kind who loves *Twilight* and those online quizzes that help you figure out what kind of person you are. Even though, in fact, Aleisha already knows. "I'm a full-on girlie girl," she warns, opening the door to her bedroom, which is three different shades of pink, with stencils of Marilyn Monroe on the walls and stuffed animals fanned out just so on the bed. Not surprisingly, Aleisha also has a keen interest in face potions and makeup. "I think it comes from my mom, wanting to be pretty," she muses.

What? Her mother, Lexi Deece-Cassidy, is puttering around their gleaming kitchen with a baseball cap jammed on her head, giving every indication of being a woman with more important things to think about than her looks. Aleisha clarifies, "Not this mom! My other mom. I remember on Friday nights — then it turned into every single day — she'd do her hair to go to the bar, and she'd be really pretty."

Aleisha has lived with so many different adults — her birth mother, her grandparents, a foster family and, since she was 11, her adoptive parents, Lexi and Sean Deece-Cassidy — that even she sometimes mixes them up. At breakfast she announces, with a conspiratorial smile, "My mom is anti-boy."

"No, I'm not," Lexi laughs, "you're thinking of your —"

"Foster mom!" Aleisha suddenly remembers.

In many ways, her adoptive parents (or "forever family," in adoption lingo) are your average above-average couple: articulate and well-educated, with good jobs — Lexi, 37, manages organizational learning at a large corporation, and Sean, 43, is a graphic designer — and an upscale home in a woodsy enclave just north of Orillia, Ont. Yet they are also outliers: one of the rare couples in Canada willing to adopt an older child from foster care. Even before they got married in 2003, they planned to adopt. "We just figured, why not have a kid who really needs parents?" says Sean.

The popular image of adoption involves babies (typically foreign ones), infertile couples (relatively wealthy ones, as an international adoption costs \$20,000 to \$60,000) and agonizing delays. For most people, adopting from the public system doesn't even register as an option, even though it can be relatively quick and doesn't cost a penny. In 2004, only about 2,300 Canadian children were placed in permanent homes; currently, anywhere from 30,000 to 40,000 children are legally free for adoption.

That no one is even sure exactly how many of the kids in government care are available for adoption is a good indicator of the state of the child-welfare system. It's a mess: There's no federal oversight and hence no national standards or inter-provincial networks. Bizarrely enough, it can be more difficult to adopt a child from another province than from overseas. Each province cobbles together its own program, but all focus on child protection. Yet what happens to children who are removed from their birth parents because of abuse or neglect depends almost entirely on the resourcefulness of individual social workers and the kindness of strangers. Sometimes, however, strangers can't be found to look after foster kids: According to a report from October 2006, child-welfare officials in Manitoba had to put an average of 121 children in hotels nightly — to the tune of about \$36,000 a night — because

foster- and group-home beds were full.

For the children stuck in this system, instability is the norm. “It’s not uncommon to be moved 20 times during a childhood in foster care,” says Andrée Cazabon, 36, who was briefly in care herself in Ottawa and now makes documentaries about various aspects of the Canadian child-welfare system, including the Gemini-nominated *No Quick Fix*. “The impact of saying goodbye too many times, of being artificially attached to strangers only to be abruptly detached, over and over again, wears on a child’s heart.”

“Shame, anger, loneliness — growing up in care, you feel like unwanted trash,” says Jane.* Now 26, she was raised in foster and group homes in Toronto. “I often wished to be adopted, but I entered the system at 12 and was not seen as fit for adoption.” Most children in the permanent care of the Crown are older than six; adoption rates decline steeply after the age of five, dwindling to almost nothing by early adolescence.

Aleisha, then, is also an outlier: She dodged the typical path for Crown wards, which is to “age out” of the system as young as 16, with nowhere to go, not even at Christmas, and with no sense of belonging to a community, much less a family. Statistically, kids who grow up in the system are far more likely to wind up homeless, unemployed, impoverished, addicted, mentally ill, in conflict with the law — and they are far more likely to have their own children apprehended, beginning the cycle all over again.

This isn’t just heartbreaking; it’s also incredibly expensive. Relatively speaking, adoption is a bargain, delivering superior results and significant long- and short-term savings: Keeping a kid in care usually costs upwards of \$30,000 a year, though the bill for a troubled teen can, conservatively, total more than \$100,000 — the per diem in some group homes is about \$200, and then there’s therapy, case-management costs and all the extras, like medication and school trips.

So why are such measly resources — in Ontario, for instance, just 2 percent of the child-welfare budget — devoted to finding adoptive families? One reason is that many of the social workers, judges and public servants who are responsible for foster kids don’t think anyone wants them. Kaushala Mahesan, an adoption worker at the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto (CAST), says, “This is a belief system I come up against time and time again, both in court and from social workers: ‘This kid’s got too many needs and problems; no family would take this on.’ It wouldn’t even enter a lot of workers’ minds that an eight-year-old, let alone a 15-year-old, could need or benefit from an adoptive family, or that we would look for one.”

Many prospective adoptive parents share this world view. While babies and toddlers who come into care tend to be snapped up, many people view foster kids over five years old as irreparably damaged — by abuse, neglect and prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol — and therefore not adoptable. Changing this mindset would require a major national initiative to promote public adoption, as well as sweeping legislative changes and an infusion of cash. That won’t happen. For one thing, there’s zero political will; the 80,000 kids currently in foster care aren’t exactly a powerful constituency. And yet, in jurisdictions where public adoption has been aggressively promoted and funded, families have been found even for kids who look terrible on paper. In 2002, for example, the U.K. upped its adoption budget and set a goal of increasing placements by 40 percent; presto, the number of kids adopted in England increased 37 percent in 2003–04 compared with four years earlier.

The key appears to be hiring workers focused solely on recruiting and educating adoptive families. Mahesan, for instance, has managed to find homes for kids with fetal-alcohol-spectrum disorder, serious behavioural issues and major disabilities. Part of her job is convincing foster kids, many of whom have endured so many losses they no longer believe in the possibility of permanency, that adoption is a good option. “I would expect any child to say no in a first meeting, especially if they’re in a stable foster home. Why leap into the unknown?” Mahesan explains. “Preparing a child for adoption is a process.”

Aleisha, however, readily embraced the concept, propelled less by a need to fill an emotional void than by a conviction that her other alternatives stank. “Adoption is the best move for her. It’s smart, strategically, and better than foster care,” says Lexi in a neutral tone. It’s what you notice first — she doesn’t speak to or about her daughter in the typical

public voice of the mother of a teenager. Instead of exasperation, there's calm curiosity, as though she's a scientist with a mission: figuring Aleisha out.

Which hasn't been easy. In fact, Lexi and Sean agree, becoming her parents has been "absolutely brutal."

You might think that when people like the Deece-Cassidys come along — smart, stable, looking for an older child — social workers would knock each other over to get at them. But after Sean and Lexi, who has a diploma in early-childhood education and a master's in education, had their home study (their application to adopt) done in 2005, no one called. Nor was there an easy way for the couple to follow up. Unlike other provinces, Ontario doesn't have a one-stop adoption agency. In fact, the only single-access point is a non-profit website, AdoptOntario, which features photo listings of waiting kids. However, at any time, only 60 to 90 of the province's more than 9,000 Crown wards are profiled on the site. The decision to input a kid's information, which can take as little as 10 minutes, is left up to individual social workers, a situation AdoptOntario's administrators find baffling given the site's strong track record of matching children and parents.

Later in 2005, Sean and Lexi decided to take matters in their own hands by attending the biannual Adoption Resource Exchange (ARE) in Toronto, where every children's-aid society can display profiles of kids it's been unable to place in its own geographic region. "It's essentially a trade show where the commodities on offer are children," says Sean. "It feels weird and uncomfortable, and of course you're drawn to the kids who are packaged most attractively."

At their first two AREs, they didn't see any kids who met their criteria: female, school-aged, with no major disabilities. In 2007 the couple saw a photo of Aleisha, then 11, who, as fate would have it, strongly resembles Lexi. They were drawn to her, but wary. The previous year, they'd fallen hard for another girl featured at an ARE and made the short list of three potential families. At the final interview, her workers announced, as though they'd just noticed, "It's a real problem that her first name is Cassidy and that's your last name." The Deece-Cassidys weren't chosen. Sean was angry; Lexi, who's more reserved, was devastated: "It's almost like a miscarriage. You have these dreams and then it's all just gone."

So with Aleisha they were cautious. She was cute, yes, but Lexi had "put up a bit of a wall. I couldn't be so open-hearted again." Aleisha, too, was well acquainted with rejection and loss. Her early years with her mother, who has addiction and mental-health issues, were rocky. "There were some good times," she says, "but not many. Mostly she made me feel useless." Aleisha's beloved maternal grandparents took her in when she was eight. Her mother would "do a lot of drugs and not come for weeks. It really made me feel not cared for." When she was almost 10, Aleisha's grandparents concluded that they were simply too old to look after her and Aleisha was placed in foster care. "It felt like they were getting rid of me. I remember unpacking at the foster home, just crying. I didn't even know them. It was so scary," she recalls.

After a few months, her mother — still promising to get clean and bring her home — started skipping their supervised visits. Afterwards, in her foster home, Aleisha would act out. "I'd be rude and wouldn't do what I was told. I had this confused feeling inside, like, Why am I doing this? Then I'd get even more angry because I felt so confused." The bright spot in her life was an adorable baby in her foster family, her biological half-brother, apprehended at birth. Aleisha would run home from school to help take care of him. Then he, too, disappeared, adopted by a native family — his birth father was native, Aleisha's was not — who lived on a distant reserve. "They didn't want me," says Aleisha. (Cross-cultural adoption is highly controversial in native communities, where, in light of the legacy of forced removal of thousands of children to be raised by non-natives, it's been referred to as "cultural genocide.")

Several months later, when she learned a couple interested in adopting her wanted to visit, Aleisha insisted on a phone call right away. "Hi, Mom!" she brayed when Lexi answered, which, if this were a movie of the week, would cue heartwarming music. Lexi's heart, however, sank. "It freaked me out. I literally had to take Pepto-Bismol during her second visit. She was too outgoing and immediately accepting, which spelled trouble."

The Deece-Cassidys are not saints or superheroes. They're regular people who know many adoptees and therefore view adoption as a good way to create a family. They weren't naive: They knew raising Aleisha would be quite different

from bringing up a child from infancy. For one thing, her personality was already formed. For another, she had a deep and complicated bond to her birth family, and she continues to visit her grandparents and little brother.

Nothing, however, could have prepared them for the type of extreme parenting required to deal with attachment difficulties, which are standard for foster children. “For kids who have been neglected and abused by a caregiver, the very relationship that was supposed to calm and soothe them was actually frightening and traumatizing,” explains Mary-Jo Land, an Ancaster, Ont., former foster parent and psychotherapist who specializes in treating children with attachment disorders. “This history comes forward with new caregiver relationships. The more intimate the relationship, the more behaviourally and emotionally disregulated they become. The child either shuts down or rages.”

Aleisha took the latter route. In August 2007, after several visits, she moved in with Sean and Lexi and all hell broke loose. “If we had a honeymoon, it lasted a day at most,” remembers Lexi. The fights, Sean says, were terrible: “Aleisha was disrespectful, mouthy, argued about everything.”

“Everything!” Aleisha agrees. “My mom and I had at least six huge screaming fights a day.”

“You never forget where it comes from, but it doesn’t make it easier to live with,” says Sean, whose laid-back manner and sharp sense of humour helped him weather the tantrums. “She was a very angry child with no social skills; she had a complete inability to gauge how others feel.”

Aleisha slammed her bedroom door so many times that he finally took it off its hinges. “First I lost it for a day, then a week, then it was three whole months!” she crows. “I broke my window screen trying to escape.

I was just so angry. I’d never had anyone tell me what to do before.” She fought her new parents’ attempts to get close, hitting, scratching and biting Lexi, reminding her, “You’re not my real mom!” Lexi recalls: “She was not able to self-regulate. She’d go from zero to 60 in seconds, just screaming.”

Scientists are just beginning to understand the ways that neglect and abuse, particularly in the first three years of life, affect the wiring of the brain. For instance, the circuitry necessary to self-regulate — to ramp down from an angry or anxious state — doesn’t develop properly. These neurological differences, coupled with the emotional and behavioural fallout from mistreatment, compromise development in complex ways. Often, children act much younger than they are. In the grocery store, for instance, Aleisha would say, “Let’s get some baby food,” and at the dinner table, “Feed me.” At the swimming pool, she insisted on games that involved holding and cuddling. “Depending on the moment,” Lexi says, “I’d parent her like a four-year-old, a nine-year-old, sometimes like an 11-year-old.”

The good news is that the brain is relatively plastic and can be rewired. The bad news is that many kids fight adoptive parents’ efforts to help them. Their experiences have made them control freaks, programmed, for good reason, to distrust and resist caregivers. After a few months of ongoing battles with Aleisha, Sean and Lexi were shell-shocked. “Is it always going to be like this?” they wondered. For the first time in their marriage, they began to argue.

They knew Aleisha was testing their commitment. And they felt compassion for her, but that’s not the same as love — and love, or at least the memory of it, is what sustains parents through tough times. “It was hard for me to feel that,” says Lexi. “I didn’t fall in love with her in the womb; we didn’t have that dance. And with an older person, you fall in love because they’re being nice to you. Well, Aleisha was nasty most of the time.”

Aleisha was not feeling the love either. Six months in, Sean and Lexi were summoned to her school and were mortified to find her in the principal’s office, clutching a handful of farewell cards: She’d told her class that she was going back to foster care. It took a while to explain that Aleisha had invented the story wholesale, and for the youth worker who’d been summoned to be convinced that the issue was “not that we were beating Aleisha, but that she didn’t want to follow any rules,” as Lexi puts it. After an extended negotiation brokered by their social worker, Aleisha grudgingly agreed to continue living with them, but only for a few more days, and only if she could remain in her bedroom at all times. “Perfect!” thought Lexi, who was near the end of her rope.

And then, without missing a beat, Aleisha asked brightly, “So what’s for dinner, Mom?”

Finding more families for kids like Aleisha requires aggressive recruiting and substantial post-adoption support. The United States is far ahead of Canada, thanks to bold national legislation introduced in 1997, which ensures ongoing supports for adopted children and incentives for agencies to find adoptive homes. Almost immediately, the adoption rate doubled in many states.

Already, some provinces in Canada are getting the message. In 2002, New Brunswick created an adoption foundation with 25 dedicated social workers; placements jumped 300 percent. When photo listings were introduced in Alberta seven years ago, adoptions spiked; the province also provides ongoing subsidies and a generous allowance for therapeutic services. But other provinces, such as Ontario, create a perverse disincentive. Payments and services are usually cut off when a child is adopted from foster care. Consequently, many foster parents who would like to adopt the kids in their homes feel they can’t afford to, or that it would be irresponsible, given their kids’ needs.

Of course, adoption isn’t a panacea, and the damage that’s been done to children can’t be repaired overnight. But finding them permanent homes is an excellent start and, Kaushala Mahesan of the CAST reports, “if families can hang in there, many kids turn a corner after the first year.”

So it was with Aleisha. In the summer of 2008, a year after she arrived, she spent a few weeks at Lexi’s parents’ cottage and returned blessedly free of the need to argue constantly. “I asked her why and she said, ‘I *told* you I needed a vacation!’ ” laughs Lexi. And Aleisha admits, “At Grandma and Grandpa’s I had to be good, so

I thought I’d just go with it.” She started to be part of the family.

This did not mean, however, that she was securely attached. Sometimes, Lexi says, their connection still feels superficial. Last August, Aleisha tearfully confessed, “I wasn’t really attached to you before, but I’m going to try now.” Although on the outside, she looks and acts normal, her interior landscape is still different from most young girls’. Recently, speaking at a press conference on adoption, Aleisha was exceptionally engaging, and the audience fell in love with her. Afterwards she shrugged, explaining, “I’m comfortable speaking to strangers because I can’t get judged by them. If I were to tell my mom what I was feeling about something, I could get judged by her.” She used to worry constantly that Lexi and Sean would “get rid of” her, Aleisha says. “If I really thought about it, I’d go crazy.” She has also struggled to make sense of what happened in her first family. Early on, she told Sean and Lexi that when she turned 18, she’d wean her biological mother off drugs: “She’ll live in the basement and she’ll hate you, by the way.”

Later, she took to writing poems: “Mommy I remember when you used to call me boo-bear. Mommy I remember when you used to come home drunk . . . all those bad things you did to me.” Today, Aleisha says she’d like her first mom to know that she is okay, so she doesn’t worry.

In fact, Aleisha is more than okay. She rattles off a long list of ways she’s changed: “I didn’t know how to gain friends or maintain friends, I didn’t know how to talk not only about myself. I never asked questions, and I’ve learned how to do that now — not perfectly, but better. And I learned public manners, making eye contact and smiling and stuff.” She is popular and doing better in school than ever before. Lounging in the living room eating pizza, rolling her eyes at Sean’s taste in music and teasing Lexi about her grumpiness in the mornings, she seems very much their kid, with her dad’s wry humour and her mom’s powers of observation. And their family is about to get bigger: The Deece-Cassidys recently signed up to foster teenage girls.

Chaos and conflict, it appears, have their own addictive charm. So does “the opportunity to see someone flourish,” says Lexi. Knowing the large role she played in Aleisha’s transformation is extraordinarily fulfilling. I ask Aleisha whether she loves her parents in the same way that, say, her best friend does. “I feel I love my parents more, because —” She breaks off, alarmed. “Don’t look like that, ol’ lady!” Lexi, not a crier, is wiping away tears.

“Because,” Aleisha continues, “we went through so much, we stuck together for all of it, so I think we have a closer

bond than a normal family.”

It was, after all, a movie-of-the-week moment. It ended quickly, when Aleisha segued to the advice she'd give another foster kid on the brink of adoption. “Look out, 'cause a shark's coming to eat you!” she hooted. Her parents laughed, too. They knew exactly what she meant.

*Name has been changed.

COMMENT



BussBoss2

A rare story that truly touches the heart

Not often anymore, with the constant chaos of the 'normal' world, does a story touch the heart like this one does. It begs the question, "why is our federal government not legislating change? Why are the provincial governments not legislating change?" The answer is simple yet complex. It comes down to money, but it is also the issue of maintaining the funding that has been started. Times are tough and these children keep falling through the cracks and I wonder how bad it has to get before legislators wake up! My husband and I have often thought of adopting, or becoming foster parents, but we have no interest in babies in this stage of our lives and I know there are many more of us out there, but the system is so complex that many people simply give up, and somehow that needs to change.

This story is really heartwarming as it has a happy ending, but I wonder how many of them don't? It takes a great deal of inner strength to be able to handle the the anger, anguish and uncertainty on a daily basis with no idea if your love and support will ever be enough to compensate for what these kids have gone through in their lives. Some of these kids have been through hell and back, and their attitudes and issues (whatever they may be) are understandable and almost a testament to their strength of character as they have survived their situations. Lexi and Sean obviously have what it takes, but many 'parents' would need support in their new roles, and the funding is often just not there - it's like "well-thanks for doing this", and "oh by the way, you're on your own now so hope you have money in reserve to pay for medical intervention (ie psychologists, therapists of any sort which are incredibly expensive on an ongoing basis)" Where is the logic in this? The story clearly shows that by not having foster parents/adoptive parents, it actually costs the governments a great deal more so I am certain that if there was the will, change could be facilitated in such a way that the children would ultimately benefit.

This story was simply great and I'm so happy that it worked out for Aleisha (and for Lexi and Sean too).

Posted Tue, 2 Mar., 2010 @ 12:19:44 PM



anonymous

adoption struggles

Thank you for sharing this story. We adopted a boy, aged almost 3, from Children's Aid, and have shared many of the same struggles as Lexi and Sean - behavioural challenges, doubts, conflict, struggles, marital conflict and family disruption. Reading their story reaffirms for me the path we took and the good years and love we have been able to provide our child. I am so appreciative that Chatelaine is giving profile to these stories of alternative families so the broader public can appreciate the challenges those of us who choose this path face.