

# Building resilience in the foster care system, from advocates to children

**This National Foster Care Month, learn how ASU faculty are working to improve foster care systems across the state and beyond**

By Megan Neely, ASU News  
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In Arizona alone, nearly [76,000 children](#) are in the foster care system, with only 3,000 registered foster families. That averages out to five children per foster family.

In the [T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics](#), Teaching Professor [Bethany Bustamante Van Vleet](#) and Director [Stephen Russell](#) have been studying foster care operations and related situations in recent years.

They both bring firsthand insights into the experiences both workers and children face, as they are foster parents themselves.

Bustamante Van Vleet hadn't thought about fostering and adoption until she was asked. She's adopted two children and has helped foster more since then.

"So many people say we don't have enough homes for these kids to go in, and ask what can we do to change that," said Bustamante Van Vleet. "You keep saying, 'Yeah, we should change that,' and there came a point where I could help change that. The research turned into, 'What can I do actually on that level to help?'"

Russell had also been asked if he wanted to consider being a foster parent.

"It changes your life forever to have a new human being that's part of your family. Within a month, I remember thinking, 'I can't even imagine what life was like before in such a short period of time,'" Russell said. "I just met him and he's 13, how could he just be so totally my kid? But that's the wonderful, amazing part."

From building hope to providing more resources to support workers and children in the foster care system, faculty members like Bustamante Van Vleet and Russell are working to improve these systems, partially inspired by their own journeys.

## Instilling hope and resilience on the front lines

Bustamante Van Vleet has loved the psychology aspect of finding what makes humans grow and eventually thrive. It served as a motivator for the work she does with her mother, Teaching Professor [Denise Bodman](#), at conferences.

The mother-daughter duo present to communities who work with vulnerable groups, including staff in the Department of Child Services and teachers or on-ground support. Together, they discuss burnout and the impact that it has on workers in this industry by exploring the topics of hope and resilience.

“One of my passions is translating what we know to be useful to people right now in the community. A lot of that has ended up working with people who work in foster care in different capacities,” Bustamante Van Vleet said. “My favorite kind of conference is where I get to help people enjoy what they do and help children.”

The science of hope is measurable. Its components involve having goals and being able to see them in the future, find pathways to get there and having the belief that following the path is achievable.

By sharing these concepts with others working in an industry such as the foster care system, Bustamante Van Vleet tries to help people understand that exposure to situations can be impactful, whether they realize it or not.

“We talk about self-narratives and the stories we tell ourselves, how important that is and how we can have stories that include hope as a component. The way we talk to ourselves can impact our willingness to continue to try,” Bustamante Van Vleet said. “We talk about connections between other people and how we can interact with them. It’s recognizing that you can get secondary trauma.”

To get an idea of the scope of this trauma, a [study](#) published earlier this year on data from 2005–2024 showed that 15–25% of foster carers report elevated levels of secondary traumatic stress symptoms.

Bustamante Van Vleet also reminds those she speaks to to look at their career goals and to remind themselves why and what they’re doing, helping them see the bigger picture. There’s a recognition that these DCS workers are overloaded, so she shares small methods that can be incorporated into breaks or conversations with others to help maintain focus and prevent further burnout.

Bustamante Van Vleet also takes these same sentiments and discusses them with her students in class, teaching students early on how to have hope and resilience to ultimately help them in their careers.

“(I teach them) how to use it to support the children and families they work with, which really is a huge piece of supporting the kids in foster care, but not just with the kids, their parents too. I think we forget how important that whole unit is. We really need to be building up everybody,” she said.

## Advocating for LGBTQ+ youth in unstable housing

Russell primarily studies adolescent development, but when he fostered and then adopted his then 13-year-old son, his focus shifted. Since then, he's been looking into the LGBTQ+ community and their well-being, specifically within foster care systems.

"I started being very interested in trying to understand the intersection of what it means to be a young person navigating foster care or unstable housing. I ended up doing some work on documenting health risks for children in foster care and unstable housing at the intersection of their race, ethnicity and sexual orientation."

In an American Academy of Pediatrics journal, Russell, along with his colleagues, were able to [publish some of the first data](#) that showed how LGBTQ+ children were represented among those living in foster care or who are classified as unstably housed.

A survey conducted from 2013–2015 throughout California showed LGBTQ+ children ages 10–18 in unstable housing reported poorer school functioning, higher substance use and poorer mental health. Other reports show a higher prevalence of school fights and mental health problems than their LGBTQ+ and heterosexual peers in stable housing.

"It's not good news, and it's not anything terribly surprising, but having the data was the first time that we actually had the data to show that," Russell said.

He hopes to expand on this data and study structural factors, such as schools and communities, that might reduce risk — including reviewing county and school investments in foster care programming and resources, and their correlation with foster children's educational performance.

Starting his role at ASU last summer, Russell says seeing how many people were also foster parents sparked a mission to increase student visibility on the topic by developing courses that overview the challenges, opportunities and well-being of children and families.

"It'd be really great to imagine how we could prepare people to have that in their future, because my own story was that I was just asked. I was asked by somebody who was like, 'Oh my gosh, there's a kid who needs somebody now, would you consider this?'" Russell said. "I thought I wasn't going to have kids. It just sort of happened in my life. We should probably think about ways to ask people to be parents."

Working toward finding solutions, Russell sees ASU as a front-runner in leading initiatives to research and teach the next generation how important it is to further support these children.

"It's really important for our families and communities that we do a better job of describing, understanding and figuring out pathways and strategies to support (children)," Russell said. "That's why I love the idea of offering a course, because 100 students may take an undergraduate course and maybe 10 of those 100 are more likely to someday be foster parents than they would have been before."

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



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