



Jerome and Teresa Patti foster pregnant girls.



Frank and Patricia Fusilli discuss foster parenthood. Their daughter Wendy sits on her father's lap.

"A lot of people have a lot of love to give," one veteran foster mother said, encouraging others to dare to foster parent.

Although she and her husband are still in their 20s they have been taking foster children for most of the past 8 years. The father explained that they want to teach their own children to reach out to others. "How can we do that unless we do it ourselves?" When in between foster children, their own ask, "When is somebody coming to live with us?"

Right now an unwed mother is living with this family. They said that they are proud of the respect for life that she demonstrated in deciding to have her baby.

Miss Patricia Ragonese of the Homefinding Department of the Foster Care Unit at Catholic Family Center, said that this case typifies a success story in the making. The girl, formerly much on her own, truant from school, and into drugs, now enthusiastically attends school,

participates in activities, obeys curfew, and is thinking about going to college.

Catholic Family Center has been helping pregnant girls and unwed mothers since 1912, according to Miss Catherine Wobus, casework supervisor. She added that in recent months there has been an increase in the number of illegitimate pregnancies. Such pregnancies occur usually between the ages of 13 and 24, and most frequently between 15 and 19. Of the 215 homes working with the Catholic Family Center, 20 are open to unwed mothers. Miss Ragonese said that the Center is looking for more homes for these girls.

While in a home, an expectant mother or girl who has given birth receives health care from clinics at local hospitals. If she wishes to continue her education she may have a tutor or attend special classes at the YWCA. Counseling, group therapy, and religious instruction are also available, Miss Ragonese said.

A pregnant girl or unwed

mother in a home has certain needs. Miss Ragonese described the appropriate home as one "with a loving but fairly neutral atmosphere." It is also important that it be a home where judgments will not be made against the girl. It's necessary, according to one father, that a pregnant girl have a room of her own with a bathroom on the same floor. "They are all looking for love, attention, security," one mother explained. "The older ones need as much praise, understanding, and trust as the younger ones."

Caring for the surrendered infants of unwed mothers is often the other side of fostering teenage mothers. The mother may elect to keep the baby with her in a foster home, in which case she is totally responsible for the baby's care, or she may place the baby in another home. In either case she must struggle with the question of her child's future. One couple caring for a young girl who had the infant with her and has now placed the baby in a foster home for three months, understands the trials the young

mother experiences. "It's her call," the father said, "but she has pressure coming at her from all directions."

A foster mother caring for a baby whose mother is undecided saw the problem more from the baby's side. "All the beautiful things that I'm seeing every day really belong to somebody else, either her mother or adoptive mother. Think what that person would give to see what I'm seeing."

Miss Ragonese said that it is often the younger girls with the more insecure backgrounds that seem to need to keep their babies. "If a girl is interested in her education or in her career or already has a secure job, she is more apt to give up the baby," Miss Ragonese said.

Separation from foster children is one of the difficulties of the task. "We'd adopt her if we could," one mother said. "You just can't think about the day that they will leave. While they're here they're one of your own." A

woman who cared for a baby that was returned to the care of her unwed mother said that she wishes that she could retain close ties with the child.

One couple explained honestly that when they first decided to be foster parents several years ago they felt totally inadequate. "But you're never alone. Your caseworker and agency are there when you need them." Foster Parents Council is another resource, which one couple said encouraged them to go on after they felt they had failed in one case.

The couples felt that the stigma once attached to foster parents is disappearing. They said that people no longer assume that they are doing it for the money or for the free babysitter, but respond positively to their role. Miss Ragonese characterized foster parents as "pretty special people."

Couples interested in being foster parents should contact Catholic Family Center at 546-7220.

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Mrs. Janet Shortino plays with foster baby. Parting with foster children can be difficult.