

Hello,

My name is Denise Stoppleworth and I am the mother of three brothers who are all diagnosed with FASD. I want to talk to you today to implore you to pass these measures and consider other measures that can help support kids like mine. But first, I would like to share a bit of our story.

Seven years ago, our three children were in high school, and college and life had quieted down a bit for us. Then, one day my middle daughter and I convinced my husband to try being a foster parent. We love kids and our hearts broke for those kids who had been traumatized and felt unloved and abandoned. My husband reluctantly agreed. Shortly after we got our license, we got a call to do respite care for another foster parent. It was a weekend placement only and it was two little boys aged 4 years and 3 months. Shortly after that respite weekend, we received a call that those boys needed to be moved because things weren't working out. We were told it would be a short placement – maybe 3 months -- and then they would be going to a relative. We agreed to take these boys making a pact that we would not move them no matter what because we didn't want to add to the trauma. Little did we know that within 3 weeks, that short placement would turn into a "longer term" placement and a year later, we would be faced with the decision to welcome their baby brother into our home as well. I will never forget that day. The younger of the two boys we were fostering was barely sleeping at night and we were exhausted. He would often need to be held all the time. He had digestive issues that meant when he had a bowel movement, he would scream, there would be blood and he would get so worked up milk would come out of his mouth and nose. I was exhausted and trying to run my business and maintain my sanity. We were given an hour to decide if we would accept their 4-week-old little brother. I went into my husband's office and cried as I told him I didn't know that I could take another child. Then, this amazing husband and father who hadn't wanted to take on fostering in the first place, looked at me and said "They are brothers. We owe it to them to at least try." And just like that, we went to the parking lot of the grocery store and picked up another baby.

The new baby also had digestive issues and he threw up all the time. We would change his clothes four or more times a day. We had no idea why and would ask doctors but got no answers. Soon our second foster son started biting kids at daycare multiple times a day. He was only a year old, and it seemed odd to be biting. He seemed too young. We almost got kicked out of daycare. By this time, they were terminating parental rights and we faced the decision to apply for adoption of the boys. This was more than we had planned on, and we were in uncharted waters. We were the only family the two youngest ever knew and all of them already felt like our family. But we knew we had a lot on our plate and didn't know what the future would hold. We were getting the boys whatever help we could to address behavioral issues and what seemed like willful disobedience to not listen to directions or lie about things. We asked the counselors what the substance abuse by mom during pregnancy meant for the future. We got very general and broad answers like they might have issues with attention or impulse but we were always told it's hard to tell. We didn't know what any of that meant.

We moved forward with adoption. Meanwhile, we saw behavior issues getting worse and shoes were being thrown at teachers in daycare, sugar became an addiction, sleep never got better and biting and digestive issues persisted. We upped the talk therapy hoping that if they worked through the trauma, we would get on top of it. We learned how to offer consequences for bad behavior and yet we didn't see any changes. Finally, we were sent to a doctor for testing, and we got a diagnosis of FASD and ADHD, but again that meant nothing to us. They were letters and spectrums, but they didn't really tell us a lot. We saw learning disabilities in school and had to fight for help for our kids because apparently being in the 45% is considered acceptable for students, even though this will set them up for failure as they get older and need the reading for every other subject. We also found out that sensory processing was an issue and that is likely why we saw the biting, so we got a biting necklace to help. But I still knew nothing of what to do or how to help.

Time passed and the boys grew and suddenly we started seeing amplified lashing out at home. Things were intentionally broken, small things would suddenly blow up into words that were just awful and heartbreaking. Things so mean were said to me that I would break down crying. I could see after that my boys felt awful and would cry over how they had hurt me, but then the next day the same thing happened all over again. If they were told no, meltdowns would begin. We started having behavioral issues at school and I was told my son was losing friends. We then saw behavior issues at home where he would physically attack me and his father, threaten to kill us or his siblings, say he was going to run out into the street in front of a car and kill himself. Trust me when I say I have experienced and heard things from a 5-, 6- and 7-year-old that you could never comprehend. I would watch while time after time my sons would impulsively run out into the middle of traffic without looking or thinking and even after being lectured 100 times about the danger, it happens again and again. Our kids started licking shopping carts, eating paper, chewing on all kinds of things and I became frustrated. Notes from 1st grade and Kindergarten teachers have gotten more and more negative and I fear my kid is getting labeled as a bad kid. Now it is what they are calling stealing and lying. My kids are being labeled and their self-esteem is plummeting. We've lost friends because they can't handle our kids and we are isolated.

In desperation I finally found an online support group and training for \$1,000 that promised to give us hope. Slowly I am learning to do different. I am learning that everything I did – we did – was wrong or not enough. I am trying to share this with the school but because my kid looks normal and talks normal, they don't recognize the disability and still punish behaviors. I ask for the supports they need but because there is not training, they don't understand and don't accommodate and therefore my son doesn't get the help and things get worse. There is so much we could have done to support our sons and help them with success. There is so much yet to do by us and by our schools and communities. And it all starts with you. If we know better. We can do better.

Have you heard any of the information about the concussion issues in football? Have you seen the movie concussion? Well, that is my kids. Except rather than getting it from playing football, they were born with a brain injury. For them to process anything is so much harder than for you

and me. And so little is understood about this. But what we do know is that as soon as we can change the environment and give them support – rather than continuing to get worse like with CTE – our kids will stabilize and maybe even improve. Key to that is early diagnosis so instead of continuing to make our kids feel bad about the outbursts and shame them for impulse control when it is their brain function, we can intervene to avoid triggers and support them to build self-control. We hound them about school and make them go to summer school rather than provide them the support they need to be successful and recognize that our expectations of these kids can't be the same. We wouldn't expect a paraplegic to run laps in gym. So why are we expecting these kids to write neat, or complete as much work as we expect those who don't have their disability do.

Do you know that my kids – though I will love them and treat them the same as my straight A kids one of whom received the National Merit Scholarship – are going to be much more likely to end up in trouble with the law, teen parents, homeless, or even deceased. Some studies show that kids with FASD will die by age 35. Pretty grim. The only thing that will help? Meeting them where they are. Providing the support, they need. Putting accommodations in place to help them. Changing their environment. These are the things we can do to stabilize their brain and give them hope for success. These are the things that can keep them out of our jails or foster care systems. But we can't do that if we don't know. We can't do it if we don't have the system in place. That's your job. You can dedicate the resources now or pay for it later in the legal system or homeless and addiction issues. We need testing and awareness for all foster and adoptive parents. We need classes on what the FASD and sensory issues mean in real life and how to support our kids through it. We need education for our school teachers and mandated help for these kids. Please help us get education and supports in our schools because they are failing kids like mine. They are beating them down and making them feel worse. They are singling them out and making them the bad kid. It's not because they are awful people. It's because they don't understand and they don't have the education. I didn't either and I would have judged these kids to just be rotten kids. Now I know these kids have so many amazing strengths to share but we need to learn how to tap into them.

My kids each have special gifts. They are sweet, funny, amazing at gymnastics and basketball, dedicated to helping others. They are prayer warriors for anyone in need and defenders of those getting bullied. They have so much to offer. They just need us to believe in them and provide the support and help they need. We need everyone to recognize that their disability is no different than paralysis or blindness. It does not diminish their value as a person but rather requires a special kind of love and support. Please pass this bill and continue to work to help these kids.