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## THE GREAT GILLY HOPKINS MOVIE REVIEW

BY ELLEN SINGER, C.A.S.E. SENIOR THERAPIST, LCSW-C



At C.A.S.E., we have always been fans of the original book from which The Great Gilly Hopkins movie is based and we were very excited when the movie was released. The story is lovely and important for a number of reasons. It accurately portrays the complicated and difficult emotions of a teen in foster care. Not unlike many children and teens in foster care, Gilly has experienced multiple moves, longs to be with her birth mother, and behaves in such a way as to keep others at bay and protect herself from further hurt. This is important in educating the public about the trauma that children and teens in foster care experience and how their challenging behavior makes sense in light of what they have to cope with emotionally every day.

The second and equally important message conveyed through the story is related to the portrayal of a foster parent. Unfortunately, through movies and other media stories, the public may be wary of foster parents – questioning their motivation- “are they in it for the money they receive?” One hears stories of children who have been neglected and abused in foster care. Stories of loving, dedicated, devoted foster families may not make it into the news. But they are certainly the majority, and this movie does a beautiful job of demonstrating this truth.

Mrs. Trotter, Gilly’s foster mother in this movie, has so much love to give and that is her motivation. She is wise, experienced, kind, and deeply patient. She understands that her role is one of healing and as such, she understands the emotional issues underneath the challenging behaviors of her foster children. Throughout the movie, Gilly works hard to push Mrs. Trotter away by endlessly mocking her and by refusing all offers of attention and comfort. Yet Mrs. Trotter remains steadfast in her commitment to Gilly. Even when Gilly runs away and is caught stealing money, Mrs. Trotter understands Gilly, forgives her, and refuses to give up on her. She begs the social worker not to remove Gilly from her home. Instead of taking personal offense at Gilly’s behavior, Mrs. Trotter knows that Gilly needs love and to be given the chance to change. Instead of “punishment,” Mrs. Trotter finds a consequence that will help Gilly grow.

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Through Mrs. Trotter's very competent care, Gilly does indeed attach to her foster family and her personality and behavior are completely transformed. While we all love happy endings, for kids like Gilly, the reality is that the process of attachment is a bit more complex. Attachment and behavior may continue to be impacted by the children's struggles with influences from their past. Nevertheless, when Gilly goes to live with her maternal grandmother, the movie accurately portrays the importance of Gilly's attachment and connection to this foster family, and theirs to her – and the need to honor and maintain these connections!

I must say that I found the back story of Gilly's entrance into foster care and the birth mother's role in her placement a bit confusing. Nevertheless, this story accurately shows how children in foster care think about and love their birth families, despite what has transpired. They may hold onto fantasies about their birth parents. In this movie, the birth mother is depicted as a selfish, self-centered, limited woman. This negative representation of a birth parent must be viewed with caution. Parents will want to help their children have a more balanced understanding of who their birth parents are and the circumstances that led to their being placed in foster care and/or adopted.

And finally, I want to say how much I appreciated the positive messages that the movie conveys around kinship care. The movie does a great job of showing the developing relationship between Gilly and her maternal grandmother.

As with every review, I recommend that if at all possible, parents view the movie first to determine its appropriateness for THEIR child. Again, while it makes sense to protect children from unnecessary hurt, foster care and adoption-themed movies can be a great vehicle for opening the door to conversations about foster care/ adoption, and about the messages, both helpful and unhelpful, accurate and inaccurate that are portrayed in popular culture. It is so important to help children express what they may be thinking and feeling (but holding inside) and movies can be a terrific catalyst for this expression.

[Visit the official movie website](#) to view the movie trailer, purchase tickets and click through to C.A.S.E.'s recommended resources for foster parents and professionals.