

Foster parents say license revocation unfair

'We're being penalized for taking in these (hard) kids'

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Jeff and Debbie Dunton of Aptos took in the so-called "hard" kids as foster- and day-care children — those who had been abused, or had emotional problems.

"We liked the challenge" because of the long-term commit-

ment of helping a problem child, said Jeff Dunton.

But the state Department of Social Services officials didn't feel the Duntons were up to the challenge, and revoked the licenses they held for six years. The revocation notices were made public this week.

"We're being penalized for taking in these kids," Dunton said.

In its revocation order, the state expressed concern for the safety of children who had been molested in the past.

"How many more dedicated foster parents are you going to shut down because of your fear and

lack of time to investigate properly?" Debbie Dunton said in a letter to the state in January.

Mrs. Dunton said the state based its revocation on fear of what might happen in the home, and failed to see the efforts and progress they made with the children.

The Duntons don't have reason to fight the state now — they adopted one and became legal guardians of five children they had in foster care, and they have two of their own at their home on Freedom Boulevard, near Aptos High School. They have had as many of 12 children in the home at

once, including their own, day-care and foster children.

The Duntons said they took guardianship to give the children stability, not to avoid the foster- or day-care regulations. Foster parents have a child on a full-time, temporary basis that can be indefi-

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"If we were so bad, why are we allowed to have guardianship for five kids?" Mrs. Dunton said.

"There are teenagers who can't get any help," Debbie Dunton said, adding that one of her former charges is on the streets now.

The revocation order includes allegations that they failed to protect three children who were threatened and molested by a day-care child, that they failed to protect a child who attempted suicide at the home, and that Jeff Dunton slapped a child.

The Duntons said the alleged molestation was an attempted molestation by a 9-year-old, and that it was a former foster child who attempted suicide by taking drugs while visiting the home.

Of the slapping incident, Jeff Dunton said it came when he was confronted by a 14-year-old boy who was bigger than he was.

A Jan. 16 letter from the state to

the Duntons said children under guardianship were "acting out sexually and with other day care children." The Duntons say this never happened.

When this reporter visited the Dunton home this week, a half-dozen mothers were there to vouch for the care their children got at the home.

"These people are absolutely not dangerous," said Joanne Slater, whose son has stayed with the Duntons. "They have enormous patience."

Another woman said her daughter made a "total turnaround" while at the Duntons. The girl had constantly run away from home before going to the Duntons, the mother said.

Sabrina Keas, 20, said the Duntons helped her turn her life around when she stayed with them from age 16 to 18. She hadn't been going to school before she got there, she said, but Jeff Dunton made sure she went by driving her to school. She graduated and went on to college. She was visiting this week with the Duntons,

who helped her newborn baby.

"The kids in this house aren't bad," said Danny Dunton, 14, one of the Dunton's natural children. All the children are treated the same, he said, and a visitor can't tell which children are which.

There is a problem placing problem children in foster homes, but not in day care, said Gail Groves, spokeswoman for the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency. The county works with the state in reviewing foster- and day-care homes.

"You beg and plead with the community" to take in the more difficult children, especially teenagers, Groves said. Confidentiality rules prevent her from comment-

ing on the Dunton case.

Although it is difficult, Groves said, the county eventually finds a place for the children.

Kathleen Norris, spokeswoman for the state Department of Social Services, said revoking licenses is not taken lightly. "It's a judgment call, she said. When mixing children with various problems, she said, "you have to look at the appropriateness" and possible vulnerability of the children.

Linda Jue, whose license for day care of infants in Live Oak was suspended last year, called the charges a "witchhunt." The Duntons and Jue met this week after learning they both had had licenses revoked.