

Chapter 3

CARING FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE



STATE OF WISCONSIN

Foster Parent Handbook



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INTRODUCTION: CHAPTER 3

This chapter describes what is involved in caring for a child in foster care from the first step of considering a child for placement in the foster home to helping a child find permanence. Parenting children placed in foster care is very demanding and incredibly rewarding. In Chapter 2, a foster parent told about what fostering was like for her. In this chapter, Brandy, Miranda, and Bregetta explain what foster care looks like from the eyes of youth to help foster parents get a better understanding of what it feels like for a child living in their home.

VOICES FROM FOSTER YOUTH

Brandy's Story

Brandy experienced many ups and downs before she was placed in foster care. She didn't have enough clothes, and the ones that she did have didn't fit her. She felt as if she was homeless at times because she was always eating at other people's houses since there was not enough food at her house. According to Brandy, her parents kept her in her room by herself. As a result, she left and stayed out too late.

Brandy was placed with Carl and Carol when she was 13 years old. At the time, Brandy had been told by her parents that she wouldn't be in placement for more than two weeks. Two weeks became one month, and one month turned into 6 months. Six months quickly became one year, and one year lasted for 5 years.

Brandy said that being placed in foster care was scary, mainly because she felt abandoned by her parents. Thinking back on her initial placement with her foster parents, she realized that the first few weeks in her foster home were an adjustment for everyone involved.

Brandy says she attempted to return to her parent's home, but that her parents kept "shutting me out." Brandy did not understand why her parents didn't call her, but she received continual support and encouragement from her foster parents. Below are some suggestions Brandy has for foster parents based upon her experiences.

Brandy's Advice to All Foster Parents

- ❖ Always be open-minded.
- ❖ Make sure you can always be there for the children in your care.
- ❖ Be sincere.
- ❖ Make sure you will be able to handle the child placed in your home.
- ❖ Make sure you make time for your foster children because they need you.
- ❖ Always make yourself available to talk with the children in your home.
- ❖ Be patient.

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My Experience in Foster Care

By Miranda Keuntjes

My life was rough growing up. I had an alcoholic father and a manic depressive mother. I had to grow up at a young age and never really got to be a kid. So, when I was 15, I started skipping school with my friends, or so I thought they were at the time. Were they really my friends? No. I had gotten into the wrong crowd and made a lot of bad choices.

Then my parents had to go to court because I was missing so much school. They decided it would be best if I went to a foster home. When the day came I didn't want to go. I just really didn't want to leave home and be away from my parents. That is the day my whole life changed. I met my foster parents, Ed and Cathy. I didn't know what to think at first. I moved from a house where I could come and go as I pleased and do whatever I wanted to a house where everything was very structured and there were a lot of rules. "What is that?" I said to myself, because I had never had structure or rules in my life.

In school, I had only been doing what I had to do to get by and pass. I never really applied myself to my school work. That is, until I had someone to keep me on track and make sure I was doing it. I started doing my school work every day and tried really hard to do well. I don't remember how many nights I sat at the kitchen table from the time I got home from school until I had to go to bed, just so I could do well in school. I started to enjoy my school work and worked hard to get good grades. The end of the first semester came and I couldn't believe it, I had gone from all F's to B's and C's. I was so proud of myself. I knew if I worked harder at it I could make the honor roll the next semester. I never thought I could do it, but I did! That next semester I made the honor roll. This is something that would have never happened at home. It was because I was in a structured environment and I had people around me who cared. What helped most was having someone who made me believe in myself, who helped me believe that I could do anything as long as I put my mind to it. Someone I could talk to when I was having a bad day, someone to put a smile on my face when I was sad, someone to point me in the right direction if I was going in the wrong direction.

I am so happy that there are families that open their hearts and homes to children in need, who are willing to offer a place for children to feel safe and cared for. I give my thanks to all foster parents for making the choice to make a difference in the life of a child.

About Bregetta

The information below is an excerpt from a story about the struggles of youth aging out of the foster care system entitled, "Struggles and Victories; Three women confront the obstacles of life" published by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on November 6, 2005.

"One of her [Bregetta's] most vivid memories is of the day her mother sent the children on a 12-block walk to the store for cereal and milk. Wilson recalls struggling to drag the gallon container home. One thought kept her and her sisters going: Once they got home, they would finally have something to eat.

But when the girls arrived, their drug-addicted mother was angry. 'She said we took too long. She threw the cereal in the garbage and poured the milk down the sink.'

Eventually, Wilson ran away after one of their fights, and her mother called the police.

After release from a group home for delinquent girls, Wilson was placed in the custody of her older sister, Juanita, who was ill-prepared to parent a troubled teen. Wilson smoked marijuana almost daily and rarely went to school at one point missing 72 days in a row. She was put on probation for stealing her sister's car.

'I didn't really care about myself,' Wilson said. 'I just wanted to die. I had nothing to live for.'

Then, at 16, she got pregnant. But Wilson couldn't view that as another in her long line of mistakes.

'I knew that I had a purpose when I got pregnant,' she explained. 'I was going to be the best mom I could be. I was going to outdo my mom.'

After she had her daughter, Asyria, she and her sister got in a fistfight and Juanita kicked them out. Wilson was still smoking marijuana, dropped out of MATC and got fired from several jobs.

Lad Lake's Connections Program eventually helped Wilson find and pay for her own apartment, but that first summer, her electricity got turned off, just as her mother's always had.

'I was really irresponsible. I did a lot of things I shouldn't have done.'

Today, Wilson lives in Washington Park with her daughter, now 4, and her fiance, Eric Butler.

Wilson credits her Lad Lake caseworker for offering encouragement not criticism when she messed up. 'If I can just make that one change, that's enough for me,' she said. 'Life is hard, but people can change and things will be OK.' "

WHEN A CHILD ENTERS FOSTER CARE

Children are placed in foster care for a variety of reasons. Most children enter foster care because they are not safe in their homes due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Others enter care because of a caregiver's imprisonment, illness, hospitalization, death or due to special needs their parents are unable to meet. Youth entering foster care under a delinquency or juvenile court order may be placed, not only for their own protection, but to protect the community as well.

Foster parents and the children placed in their homes should know the reasons for the child's placement because this information will determine which foster family is best able to meet that child's needs. Foster families need to be prepared to provide appropriate care and supervision to address the impact of abuse or neglect on the child and assure a safe environment for all family members.

In addition, the child may have questions about why he or she is in a foster home, and foster parents must be prepared to provide sensitive and truthful answers appropriate to the child's age and understanding.

Placement Considerations

No foster parent is a perfect match for every child. It is important for foster families to think seriously about what kinds of children they feel comfortable and capable of caring for. Among the many characteristics to consider are: age, gender, race, religion, disabilities or conditions, emotional or physical problems, and the impact the placement may have on their own children. During the home study or assessment process, foster parents should give honest answers to questions about the children they have the most skill and feel most comfortable caring for in their home.

Foster parents and other family members should not feel bad about acknowledging any lack of experience or concerns about caring for children with specific characteristics or needs. Having that information is the best way for caseworkers to make appropriate placements of children and provide additional training and support to foster parents so children can receive the best care to meet their needs.

The caseworker will provide foster parents with as much information as possible about a child to allow foster parents the opportunity to ask questions or decline placement of a child. Sometimes it isn't possible to have complete information about the child prior to or even at the time of placement, but the caseworker will discuss what information is available and when foster parents can expect to receive more information.

The foster family has the final say about which children they are willing to care for. Ideally, there would be time for foster families to gather more information, have family

discussions, and thoughtfully consider whether they can meet the needs of the child being considered for placement, but sometimes children need placement immediately.

Foster parents who are relatives most often feel pressure to take placement of a child with short notice because caseworkers will turn to relatives as the first choice for a child who needs placement outside of the home. It is important for foster parents who care for relatives to be honest about their capacity to provide a safe and nurturing environment and to know it is okay to say “no”. Even if a relative is not able to take primary placement of a child, relatives can play many other important roles in helping children when out-of-home placement is required.

Since the decision to accept or decline placement of a child may be difficult, the box below contains information about reasons a family may decide to decline placement of a child in their home.

Reasons to Decline a Placement

- ❖ A foster family did not feel they could meet the needs of the child being referred.
- ❖ Placement of another child may mean their own or other foster children must share bedrooms, and the family may not be comfortable with certain children sharing a bedroom.
- ❖ Another child in the home is having difficulties, and the foster family does not have the time and resources needed to care for an additional child.
- ❖ Another child is not quite settled in and needs additional time and attention.
- ❖ The foster family is experiencing stress unrelated to parenting that would impact their ability to provide good care.

It is okay to decline a placement. Foster parents should not accept a placement they do not feel comfortable taking, even if the child needing placement is a relative. Children in foster care require parents who are ready and able to care for their unique needs for as long as they are in care.

If foster parents have questions about placement matches, they should talk with their licensing worker.

Pre-Placement Information

A **pre-placement visit** is one or several visits between a child and a new foster family that occurs once the decision has been made to move the child to the foster home. These visits may be as short as an hour or as long as a weekend and are intended to help the child and family learn more about each other. It can also ease concerns the child may have about the transition. Not every tribe or agency does pre-placement visits, so foster parents should speak with their licensing worker or the child's caseworker to find out more about how their agency or tribe works.

It is important to include the child's parents in a pre-placement visit whenever possible to help establish positive relationships between foster parents and birth families. Even if foster parents and the child's parents can't meet right away, foster parents need to remember the critical role and important responsibilities that the parents have to their children. For the child's sake, foster parents should strive to create a positive working relationship with the child's family as soon as possible before or after placement.

The level of anxiety produced by placement in foster care can be decreased when both children and their families can receive as much information as possible about the foster family, too. Some foster parents create a foster family book or info sheet to share with children who may be placed in their home. These books usually include pictures of the family, home, pets, and neighborhood, and gives information about things the family likes to do together. This helps children become more familiar with the home and family before they are placed. A form labeled **Resource Family Profile** is included in Section 6 of Appendix 7 in this handbook. This tool can be used by foster parents to share information about themselves with children who may be placed in their home with the children's families.

HOW PLACEMENT AFFECTS CHILDREN

Children feel an incredible sense of loss and confusion when they are separated from their families. They have lost the most important people in their lives — their parents, sometimes their siblings, other relatives, and individuals close to their family. They have lost their familiar pattern of living. They have lost their homes, pets, and the places and things that make up their world. Perhaps they even changed schools, uprooting them from their friends and neighborhood. They have lost the little things that comfort them, such as certain smells, maybe a favorite toy or stuffed animal, a special place in their home, the way their parent made a sandwich, or the way the world sounded when they were falling asleep. No matter how nice a foster home is, in the beginning, it will feel strange and uncomfortable to a child.

School changes, which often go hand-in-hand with placement in foster care, can be particularly difficult for children. School is where children learn to make friends and see people from their neighborhood. Moving to a new school increases the risk of losing the connections from the neighborhood or school. This is especially true for teenagers, for whom placement often means separation not only from family and peer groups but from after-school activities and jobs.

In addition to changes where they live and play, children placed in foster care must often learn what “normal” behavior is in their new foster home. Even though it may have been unsafe, children often see their family’s behavior as normal. Many children in foster care find their family’s behavior reassuring simply because it is familiar. Sometimes children think that it is **their** fault they are placed in foster care.

It is critical for foster parents to understand that children will experience many complex emotions that they will not understand. They will not typically welcome the idea of being placed in a new home with strange people, noises, rules, and smells. The home of foster parents who are relatives may have some advantages of being familiar to children who are placed with them, however, in these circumstances the changes in roles is what children will need time to adjust to. The more patient and understanding foster families can be, the more likely it will be that the child will slowly adjust to his or her placement in the foster home.

In addition to patience and understanding, foster parents also need information. To help, this section of the handbook provides information about the following factors that affect the adjustment and well-being of children in foster care: attachment, abuse and neglect, family interaction (visits), multiple moves, and culture.

Attachment

Attachment is the emotional connection that infants and children develop with their parents and other people who care for them. It is through a child's attachment to those around them that children begin to develop a sense of security, individuality and their place in the world.

Attachment develops over time as a person's needs are met by significant adults, typically one's parents. The more consistently a child's needs are met over time by trusted people, the stronger the attachment becomes. If a child's needs are met inconsistently, a child may learn that he or she can't depend upon the adults in his or her life. For children in foster care, attachment may not only be disrupted by patterns of abuse and neglect but also by the removal from their homes and placement into a foster home. Impaired attachment can significantly affect a child's ability to sustain relationships, become independent, achieve a positive sense of self-esteem, develop consciousness of how one's actions impact others, and develop self-discipline.

Attachment development and attachment disorders are very complex. Many agencies and organizations sponsor entire trainings on these topics. **For more information, contact the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center at www.wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-762-8063.**

Impacts of Abuse and Neglect

Abuse, neglect, and separation from important people in their lives all can have profound effects on children coming into foster care. The degree of the impact varies greatly among children. The box below contains some factors that may influence how well a child copes with the effects of abuse or neglect. The impact of abuse and neglect on a child's development is discussed later in this chapter.

Factors that Influence How a Child Copes

- ❖ The age of the child. In general, young children are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect and are less able to protect themselves.
- ❖ The length of the abuse or neglect. Severe, frequent abuse or neglect over long periods of time can be more damaging.
- ❖ The child's relationship with the abuser. The closer the relationship the child has with the abuser, the more severe the impact of the abuse or neglect can be on the child.
- ❖ Relationships with other adults. Children who have relationships with other important adults or individuals tend to be more resilient when experiencing abuse and neglect.
- ❖ Resiliency. Some children are better able to cope with and recover from the effects of abuse and neglect, while others are more emotionally vulnerable.

Importance of Family Interaction

Visits between the child and his or her family, including any siblings, is the best way to maintain critical connections for children. In Wisconsin, contacts with a child's family are called "family interactions" which encourages people who work in child welfare to think about how families can have contact on a regular basis, not just for formal face-to-face visitation. Family interactions are required by state policy and should take place in many ways – through school events, doctor appointments, visits at the agency or foster home, and other day-to-day activities. Foster parents are expected to assist with family interactions as specified in the Family Interaction Plan for a child placed in their home.

Foster parents cannot prohibit or restrict a child's ability to interact with his or her family; family interactions are not earned or withdrawn as rewards or punishments. Any restriction of a child's interaction with his or her family must be documented in a court order or approved by the child's caseworker. If foster parents have a concern about the child's reaction to family interactions or the child's safety, they should contact the child's caseworker.

Children may experience many different feelings and emotions before, during, and after they interact with their parents and other family members. These emotions can often impact the child's behavior. Coping with these behaviors may be challenging for foster parents.

When children are placed with foster parents who are relatives, interaction with birth parents is equally difficult. It is important that the adults (foster parents and birth parents) take time to discuss how to best manage family interactions and visits between children and birth parents. Children will be able to better manage transitions before and after time spent with birth parents either in person or on the phone if they believe everyone is working together.

The box on the next page includes some possible issues foster parents may encounter when a child in the foster home and his or her family get together.

Issues Related to Family Interaction

Some children may be upset after family interaction. If children are upset after family interaction, allow them to have and express their feelings. Even if it is occasionally upsetting, in general, there are more advantages than disadvantages to such interactions. Family interaction helps the child maintain a sense of reality about his or her family. Having a schedule to help the child know when the next contact with family will occur will also be helpful.

Family interaction may feel like a mistake. Do not conclude that it is a mistake for children to visit with their families. However, if foster parents have serious concerns about the safety of the child during family interactions, they should discuss those concerns with the child's caseworker.

Children need to talk. If children are allowed to talk freely about their families and their situation, they often feel less anxious. Foster parents should answer a child's questions in a way that is appropriate to the child's age and understanding. Responses should be clear, simple, and sensitive.

Family is still family. Children often continue to love their parents no matter how they are treated or what problems their parents have. Foster parents should be careful about what they say about a child's family and how it is said. If foster parents are negative, children may respond defensively, which could have a negative impact on their development, sense of security, and relationships in the foster home. It could also make children feel they must choose between their parents and their foster family.

(Adapted from State of New York Foster Parent Handbook)

The specific statewide requirements for family interactions are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Impacts of Multiple Moves

Children need stable, nurturing environments in which they can grow, develop, and explore the world around them. When children experience multiple placements, their relationships with people they care about are disrupted, often permanently. If their connections to people are frequently interrupted, children's ability and willingness to form attachments and develop trust can be compromised.

Children who have experienced multiple moves often demonstrate behavioral issues which can, in turn, lead to additional moves. In time, children may even get used to or expect to be moved from home to home or person to person. Some children respond to frequent moves by behaving in ways that prevent closeness or intimacy. This defense mechanism prevents additional losses but has huge developmental and personal costs.

When a foster parent is considering placement of a child who has experienced multiple placements, he or she should carefully consider the child's need for extra time, attention, patience, and commitment. Foster parents need to learn about things that worked well in previous placements to build upon positive interactions with the child. Knowing what didn't go well in other homes can also give foster parents information about what has been tried and shouldn't be repeated.

It is also important for foster parents to think about the impact moves have on children when they are considering requesting that the agency remove a child from their home. Foster parents should talk with their licensor to see if a child's placement can be maintained with added support, training, and respite so the child does not have to experience another move and disruption.

Culture and Children in Foster Care

Culture means the values, rituals, and belief systems of an individual, family, community, clan, tribe, or other group. The neighborhoods, schools, friends, smells, food, music, religious practices, celebrations, and the things a child may leave behind when he or she is placed in foster care all make up a child's culture and identity.

A foster parent's ability to understand and support people of different cultures can have a tremendous effect on how well children adjust to foster care. When a child is placed in foster care, the culture of his or her family or community of origin is often quite different from — or maybe even in conflict with — the culture of the foster family. When this happens, children often feel caught between trying to figure out how to fit into the culture of the foster family and also remaining true to their own culture.

All of a child's experiences and what he or she has learned from his or her own culture will affect how that child adjusts to the foster home. This process is different and unique for every child who enters foster care. Foster parents need to be able to adjust the

culture in their home to accommodate aspects of the child's culture and give that child room to figure out his or her new cultural surroundings.

The box below gives some tips for foster parents to help reduce cultural conflicts for children in their homes.

Reducing Cultural Conflicts for Children

- ❖ Ask children and their parents about rules, rituals, and routines and find ways to meet those needs. (Example: preparing foods familiar to the child).
- ❖ Help children celebrate and appreciate their cultural roots by finding information about their heritage, attending ethnic events, and connecting with groups that may be able to help give more information about that particular group.
- ❖ Consider the origins of the routines, rituals, and values in your home.
- ❖ Consider which things in your home can be modified to meet the needs of the children and to make them feel more comfortable.
- ❖ Find out what you need to learn in order to work with children from varied backgrounds; seek out that information, learn it, understand it, and appreciate it.
- ❖ Challenge and work with community members to prevent discrimination.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

A child's development is affected by being abused or neglected and by being placed into foster care. Foster parents should review the **Child Development Chart** found in Appendix 4 of Section 6 of this handbook. The milestones on this chart that are most relevant for children in foster care are not meant to be comprehensive. The chart outlines normal development for children and the effects that abuse and neglect may have on that development. There are many "red flags" that could possibly indicate developmental delays for various ages.

Toddlers (12-36 months)

A toddler with typical development is learning to physically separate from their parents; they often alternate between clinging to parents and pushing away. Toddlers also have a need to be successful at expressing their feelings, but they also need reassurance of their limits in this area.

Toddlers: Child Development "Red Flags"

- ❖ No two-word phrases by 24 months.
- ❖ Loss of speech or babbling social skills.
- ❖ Not walking by 18 months.
- ❖ Not following simple directions by 24 months.
- ❖ Frequent falling and difficulty with stairs.
- ❖ Unable to communicate with short phrases.
- ❖ Not participating in "pretend play".
- ❖ Little interest in other children.
- ❖ Extreme difficulty separating from their parents, especially their mother.

Preschool Years

Play is especially important for children at this stage of development. Through play, children learn to think versus acting on impulses. This is a very self-centered stage. Children in this stage believe they are the most important person in the room.

Preschool Years: Child Development “Red Flags”

- ❖ Loss of speech or social skills.
- ❖ Developing asthma.
- ❖ Difficulty paying attention to activities that interested other children their age.
- ❖ Difficulty following simple instructions.
- ❖ Acting in impulsive, potentially dangerous ways without considering the consequences.
- ❖ Seeming to always be in a hurry.
- ❖ Sudden emotional outbursts that seem inappropriate.
- ❖ Persistent misbehavior after being told “no” multiple times.

School Age

School age children are learning self-control, to accept delayed gratification, and how to plan ahead. Fairness is important to children in this stage and they have a very rigid sense of right and wrong. School-age children need to have time with their peers and being “liked” is very important to them.

School Age: Child Development “Red Flags”

- ❖ Loss of speech or social skills.
- ❖ Difficulty with learning and memory.
- ❖ Difficulty interacting with other children.
- ❖ The following are typical for most children learning to read, but if the child is doing any of the following after age 7, talk with their doctor:
 - Confusing the order of letters in words.
 - Guessing words from seeing the first letter.
 - Losing their place on the page; struggling with each word.
 - Reading very slowly and tiring easily from reading.

Adolescents

Early-adolescents is a time of discovery and exploring self-identity. Foster parents will notice that the moods of an adolescent child are often intense and unstable. Children in this stage of development will seek to please peers and want to resist their parents. Late-adolescents is focused on gaining the skills necessary for independence. Children in late-adolescents may also be exceedingly idealistic and may turn away from their parent's values.

Adolescents: Child Development “Red Flags”

- ❖ Loss of speech or social skills.
- ❖ Headaches or migraines.
- ❖ Sleep problems.
- ❖ Suicidal thoughts.
- ❖ Depression.
- ❖ Alcohol and drug use.

Other red flags may be associated with things other than developmental delays, such as drug and alcohol addiction. These are not only problems for teens and older youth, as younger children are also exposed to drugs and alcohol. If foster parents see any of the following, they should talk with the child's caseworker: Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed; change in school achievement; unpredictable mood swings; withdrawing from friends; lying about activities; lack of personal hygiene; sudden weight loss; bloodshot eyes; or smelling like substances, such as alcohol or drugs.

This is not a comprehensive list of “red flags” to development or developmental concerns. Foster parents should discuss any concerns they may have about the development of a child placed in their home, with the child's caseworker. Foster parents should also speak to their licensing worker if they would like additional training on child development.

HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO PLACEMENT

It is often difficult for children to adjust to a new home with new people and new rules. This section includes information about how to make a child's adjustment to the foster home a little easier.

If there has not been a pre-placement visit, foster parents will need to show the child around, including where the child will put his or her belongings, sleep, and be a part of family events. The child should also be given an opportunity to have time alone. Foster parents need to explain the household routine and let the child know the family rules and expectations; children need to know what the rules are in order to be able to follow them. Keep in mind the child's age and developmental abilities; this will also help foster parents ensure that their expectations for the child are realistic.

Another thing foster parents may do when a child arrives in their home is to talk to the child about his or her likes and dislikes and plan how to make introductions to new people. It may reassure the child to let him or her know that the reasons for his or her placement are private and that no one else needs to know unless the child wants to tell them. Foster parents can help the child come up with truthful and appropriate ways to answer the most common questions asked of children in foster care. For example, the child could tell others, "I am staying with this family for a while."

When children are placed with foster parents who are relatives that they have had a previous relationship with there are some advantages, such as the home and routine being familiar. What will not be familiar is the change in roles as grandma, grandpa, aunt, uncle or cousin now takes on the role of "mom" and "dad". This change in roles can be very confusing. It will be important to work through these changes in roles to maintain positive relationships and help children adjust.

Foster parents should not throw away toys or clothes that a child has brought along, even if they are in very poor condition, unless the items are unsafe or contaminated. These items are familiar and may help the child feel more comfortable in the new environment. Also, it is important for the child's family to see their child with toys and clothes they have sent. Sometimes it is better not to wash the children's items right away, as they are used to the smells of their family and home. If a foster parent must get rid of a child's things, he or she should tell the child beforehand and try to help the child understand why his or her things need to be thrown away.

Foster children are allowed, according to licensing regulations, to have their own personal items, including clothing, written and recorded materials, and other items that are appropriate to the child's age and understanding. While foster parents may not particularly like a child or youth's choice in clothes or music, it is important that the child or youth have the opportunity to express him or herself in an appropriate manner. Those items may be restricted under certain circumstances but should not be permanently taken away from the foster child without specific consent of the child's

caseworker. If foster parents have concerns about a child's choice of music, clothing, or other recreational or personal items, they should discuss the situation with the child's caseworker.

The first few weeks of placement will be a period of adjustment for everyone. The most important thing foster parents can offer during this time is a stable and consistent family life. Because children who come to foster care have a variety of backgrounds and experiences, every child's adjustment will be different. Foster parents can help a child through this time by being patient, flexible, and understanding. It is also important that foster parents pay close attention to the adjustment of other children in the home during the transition of a new child into the home.

Some foster parents have routines that they share with every child who comes to live with them. One foster parent said she takes every child to the grocery store – just the two of them – on the child's first day in the home to buy food that the child likes and to have some time with the child. It may be helpful to talk with other experienced foster parents to find out if there are ways they have learned to help children feel a little more comfortable in their new home.

The Process of Adjustment and Grieving

Children entering foster care typically react to separation from their families and express their feelings through behavior, not with words.

Children react to being placed in foster care in a variety of ways. Some create problems or act out while others withdraw from the people around them. Still other children react by being model children. Although these outward behaviors are very different, children feel many of the same things when they are placed in a foster home. They may feel confused about why they have been separated from their families, and upset about what happened to them. Some children feel angry, fearful, and powerless.

Many children eventually respond to patience and consistent parenting and adjust well to their placement. Each child works through the process of grieving the separation from their birth family at their own pace. This process may seem to move forward but then stall; it may take days, weeks, or even years.

The following section describes the stages, or phases, of grief that children in foster care often go through, ways children may act in these stages, and some tips for helping children work through their feelings.

Stages of Grief and Loss

This section discusses the different ways and stages that children process grief and loss in their lives. All children in foster care experience significant loss and grief when they are separated from their families, even when they are placed with relatives. Some of the children in foster care have experienced even more loss prior to being placed in foster care. This section has suggestions for helping children work through their struggles of grief and loss.

It is important to note that children in foster care often move from one stage of grief and then back again or even appear to experience two stages at one time. There may be a spiraling effect, and children's situations, duration in care, and emotional development will affect how they handle their grief. The stages are not simply a "checklist" that children go through. They may be experienced for a variety of reasons and for varying periods of time.

Stage 1: Shock and Denial

When a child is first placed, he or she may be very eager to please, cooperative, and generally enjoyable to be around. Experienced foster families recognize these behaviors as the “honeymoon” stage. Other children in the shock and denial stage may have difficulty eating or sleeping or may revert to the behaviors of a much younger child.

Working Through the Shock and Denial Stage

- ❖ Receive the child calmly. Settle down to a regular routine as quickly as possible.
- ❖ Explain and discuss the reasons for placement in a way that the child can understand and in a soothing and reassuring tone. Repeat this information as often as needed.
- ❖ Give factual information about the placement and the location of the child’s parents and siblings.
- ❖ Respect the child’s feelings about what has occurred. Let the child know that you are available if he or she wants to talk.
- ❖ Respect the child’s family and the child’s loyalty to them.
- ❖ Help and support interaction with the child’s family to the greatest extent possible.
- ❖ Let the child have his or her favorite things and provide a place to keep them.
- ❖ Focus on good behavior.
- ❖ Avoid threats. Warnings of “I’ll tell your worker” or “I will give my 30-day notice” leave painful impressions and make a child feel insecure. The child has already lost one or more homes and may feel threatened by losing another. In the long run, this undermines the child’s sense of attachment and security and is extremely hurtful.
- ❖ Give the child responsibilities in line with his or her age and ability: not too many and not too few.

Stage 2: Anger

This stage is necessary to continue processing the pain and continuing to heal. Most children have difficulty expressing their feelings, so they act them out. Some may come to a foster home in the anger stage. They may refuse to follow house rules, break things, attempt to run away, or try to hurt themselves. The anger stage is typically the most difficult for foster families because it is hard to cope with the behavior, understand what the child is feeling, and find ways to support the child through this process. Foster families may need to discuss how the agency can provide additional support through respite or other resources during this stage.

Working Through the Anger Stage

- ❖ Tell the child that it's okay and normal to be angry.
- ❖ Teach the child acceptable ways to express anger.
- ❖ Remind the child of the rules and be consistent with consequences if the rules are broken.
- ❖ Find a safe place for the child to be angry.
- ❖ Help children understand that they are not to blame for their placement in foster care.
- ❖ If the child tells exaggerated stories, don't argue.
- ❖ Think of the challenging behaviors as messages of unmet needs: "I'm lonely," "I'm bored," "I have no power," "I don't feel safe," "You don't value me," or "I don't know how to tell you what I need."
- ❖ Work with the child's therapist, caseworker, tribe (if applicable), parents, and other professionals to determine the best intervention strategies to help the child adjust to placement and his or her situation.
- ❖ Give the child time and space.
- ❖ Find supportive resources for both the child and your family.

Stage 3: Bargaining

Children in this stage will do everything they can think of to go back home. Many believe that if they are good, they will go home. For example, a child may ask if he or she can go home if he or she does well in school and gets good grades. Or, he or she may decide to be “bad” so the foster family will want to send him or her home, to another foster home, or to another placement.

Working Through the Bargaining Stage

- ❖ Explain and discuss the reasons for placement again, but do not argue with a child who does not accept the reasons. Allow the child time and space to process what is occurring.
- ❖ Continue to help and support interaction with the child's family.
- ❖ Communicate the child's beliefs to his or her parents and other people involved with the case; when possible, develop a collaborative plan for helping the child work through this process.
- ❖ Continue to reinforce and practice tips given in the shock and denial stage.

Stage 4: Despair

Eventually, reality sets in. The child may have a variety of reactions as he or she starts to understand and accept what is happening. Foster parents should pay attention to changing behaviors of the child, including loss of appetite or sleep, not wanting to be around the foster family or any other people, dangerous or risky behaviors, or other new or unusual actions.

Working Through the Despair Stage

- ❖ Encourage the child to talk about his or her feelings but also respect the child's choice to not talk or to talk about things at his or her own pace.
- ❖ Use dolls and pictures to help younger children act out feelings through play.
- ❖ Help older children express hurt and worry in their own ways.
- ❖ Get the child interested in creating a life book (discussed later in this chapter).
- ❖ Show respect for the child's feelings and provide reassurance through supportive gestures – for example, hugs or extra time and attention.
- ❖ Work with the child's caseworker, therapist, parents, and other professionals to develop the best plan for support. Regularly update everyone about the child's behaviors.

Stage 5: Acceptance or Managing Loss

At this stage, children may begin to develop new friendships and accept the foster parents' role in their lives. They may be able to move into new situations more easily and experience less frustration.

Working Through the Acceptance Stage

- ❖ Provide the child with opportunities to develop new relationships.
- ❖ Continue to assist with reunification efforts or, if reunification is not the plan, support the permanence goal for the child.
- ❖ Allow the child to continue to remember and talk about his or her family.
- ❖ Continue to work on the life book with the child.

(Information in this section is adapted from Illinois and Iowa Foster Parent Handbooks)

Remember:

- ❖ **Foster children often move from one stage and then back again or even appear to display two stages at one time.**
- ❖ **A foster child's reaction to his or her experience in foster care will vary from child to child.**
- ❖ **Changes in permanency plans or life events may impact a child's grieving process.**

Other Ways to Help with the Adjustment Process

Understand Normal Behavioral Development

Even experienced parents may forget the normal developmental stages and patterns of child behavior. Children in foster care may have behavioral or developmental challenges unlike other children their age. It can be helpful to recognize that many challenging behaviors are “normal” and that not all difficult behaviors are related to placement. Also, keep in mind that many foster children may function at a level more typical of a younger or older child. For example, a 7-year-old may have the social skills of a 3-year-old. Foster parents will have to work with the child on a 3-year-old level until the child’s social skills increase.

Understand the Child’s History

Foster parents should refer to the Information for Foster Parents form provided by the caseworker and ask questions about the information provided. Understanding the child’s experiences with his or her parents and other foster families may provide insight into the child’s behaviors.

Provide a Supportive Home Environment

A safe, nurturing, and predictable home can help a child work through feelings of fear, anxiety, loss, grief, and other emotions. Being predictable and consistent can also help a child who may have difficulty transitioning from one thing or one place to the next, and it can help foster parents develop an understanding of the cause and effect of his or her behaviors.

Try to Understand Problem Behavior

Foster parents should try not to take a child’s misbehavior personally. Children often do not consciously know what they are doing at the time they are doing it. There are many reasons children behave the way they do. It may be that, in the past, acting out was the only way to get the attention of a parent or caregiver. It may be that the child thinks certain behaviors will get a response from their caregiver. It may also be that something triggered “fear” and they are acting out because they feel a need to protect themselves from something unknown or unfamiliar even if it was something positive. When a caregiver does not take a child’s behaviors personally and remains calm, it is easier to think more objectively about how to respond.

Identify What Triggers the Problem Behavior

When a child displays problematic behavior, foster parents should think about what happened before the behavior took place or the “trigger” for the child’s behavior. Sometimes the child’s behavior is an immediate response to the trigger. Other times the trigger may have occurred the day or week before the behavior. It can be hard to discover what events trigger a child’s behavior, but foster parents should look for patterns. Working closely with the child’s case manager, therapist, school staff, parents, and other professionals may help foster parents and the child’s team to understand what triggers a child’s behaviors and how to address those behaviors.

Bring Triggers to the Child's Attention

Not every trigger is observable. Once a child has calmed down, it is good to ask them what they think led up to the behavior. Questions such as, "What happened right before you threw the toy?" and "How did that make you feel?" may allow the child to connect feelings to behavior and give foster parents information about what triggered a behavior.

Foster parents need to address the situation with the child when the child is calm so that both the foster parent and the child can work together to find a solution. For example, a foster parent might say: "I've noticed that when I say that it's your bedtime, you usually seem to have a hard time getting your pajamas on. Is there anything we can do together to help you when it is time for bed?"

By bringing these observations to children's attention, foster parents will help children understand the cause and effect of their behavior and give them ideas about how to react differently.

Try Not to Label a Child's Behavior

It is easy to slip into a habit of using labels. For example, a foster parent may observe a child acting "depressed" and communicate that to the therapist or caseworker. "Depressed" has different meanings to different people. Giving descriptions based on the behaviors observed is much more helpful to everyone. For example: "John stays in his room for most of the day and doesn't eat very much. He doesn't laugh or smile at all and doesn't want to play with other kids" is more helpful than saying "John is depressed."

Document Behaviors to Help You Understand and Respond

Writing down observations and being specific can help identify what triggers the problem. Foster parents should write down what led up to the child's behavior, what behaviors or actions the child engaged in, and how the situation was addressed.

A record of the behaviors also helps measure the child's progress. It allows the child's caseworker, therapist, parents, and the child to see how positive change has occurred over time, no matter how small the change may be.

The chart on the next page is an example of how to document a child's behaviors to try to determine what triggered the event and how to address those triggers and the child's response.

A Sample Chart for Documenting a Child's Behaviors

Date	Time	What happened	What happened before	What happened after	Duration and intensity of incident	Who was present

(Information in this section adapted from Illinois Foster Family Handbook)

When Problem Behaviors May Be Signs of Emotional Disturbance

Sometimes it is difficult to separate behaviors and concerns associated with foster care placement from those associated with a more serious emotional disturbance or mental health concern. Signs of emotional disturbance typically are behaviors and reactions that last too long, are exaggerated, or are consistently inappropriate for the situation or the child's stage of development. If a child in your care displays unusual behaviors that you have not seen before, talk with the child's caseworker.

Possible Signs of Emotional Disturbance

- ❖ It is logical that a child would get mad when someone calls him or her a name, but plotting to seriously hurt the person simply due to an insult is cause for concern.
- ❖ Two-year-olds typically throw themselves on the floor during temper tantrums; teenagers typically do not.
- ❖ It is normal to panic and flee from a fire, but not from a working elevator.
- ❖ Crying in reaction to separation and loss can be expected. Crying that goes on every day in school for 6 months is concerning.
- ❖ It is not unusual for a child to talk to himself or herself on occasion, but it is concerning when a child reports hearing voices or takes action based on what the voices are saying.

(Adapted from the State of Illinois Foster Family Handbook)

Suicide Risk

Suicidal thoughts, also called suicidal ideation, must be taken very seriously. If a child placed in a foster home tells the foster parents that they have had thoughts about hurting or killing themselves, foster parents must act **immediately**. Foster parents must report this information to the child's caseworker or the agency immediately. If foster parents cannot reach the child's caseworker, they should report this information to another caseworker at the agency. Foster parents should talk with the child's caseworker at the time of placement to create a crisis response plan and to identify who to contact in the event the caseworker cannot be reached.

It is important for foster parents to be able to discuss these thoughts with children placed in their care. These can be difficult conversations. Foster parents should talk

with their licensing worker about how to handle these conversations, and about attending additional training on suicide if necessary.

Foster parents should be aware of any changes in mood or behavior of children placed in their home, as these could be signs of suicide risk.

Signs of Suicide Risk

- ❖ Sudden changes in personality.
- ❖ Giving away their belongings.
- ❖ Significant weight gain or loss.
- ❖ Changes in sleeping patterns.
- ❖ Depression.
- ❖ Extreme boredom.
- ❖ Talking about wanting to die or be dead.
- ❖ Neglecting personal appearance.
- ❖ Running away from home or truancy.
- ❖ Family trauma.
- ❖ Withdrawal.
- ❖ Recklessness.
- ❖ Try to be perfect.

In addition to these warning signs, other risk factors to look for include: unexpected pregnancy; breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend; stressful family situations or the loss of a loved one; failing in school; problems with the law or in school; serious illness or injury; and previous history of suicide attempt or intent.

If foster parent see these behaviors or risk factors, it does not necessarily mean that the child or youth is suicidal, but these are things to watch for. If foster parents have any concerns about the safety or well-being of a child or youth placed in their home, they should discuss them with the child's caseworker **immediately**.

FOSTER PARENTS SHOULD ALWAYS ASK QUESTIONS OR SEEK HELP IF A CHILD'S BEHAVIOR IS UNUSUAL OR SOMETHING THEY HAVE NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

FOSTERING CHILDREN IMPACTED BY SEXUAL ABUSE

Many children do not disclose sexual abuse, even when asked about it directly. It might be possible that no one, including the caseworker, has knowledge that a child was sexually abused until after he or she has been in placement for a while and feels more comfortable telling that information. Below are some strategies or ideas that work with all children in foster care but especially for those who have been sexually abused.

Strategies for Working with Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused

- ❖ **ANY** child entering your home may have experienced sexual abuse. Be prepared to recognize and deal with the issues related to sexual abuse.
- ❖ Foster parents must be able to discuss sex and sexual abuse. Children need to know that they can talk about what has happened to them without upsetting you.
- ❖ Be patient: children need time to develop trust, to feel comfortable disclosing the circumstances of prior sexual abuse, and to learn ways of working through their experiences.
- ❖ Remember that flexibility is essential — different children need different things at different phases in their recovery.
- ❖ You may need to alter your own behaviors and develop or modify house rules to provide a safe and comfortable home environment for the child.
- ❖ Be willing and able to provide **HIGH LEVELS OF SUPERVISION**. Some children who have been sexually abused develop overly sexualized behaviors. Work with the child's caseworker, therapist, and other professionals to develop a safety plan.
- ❖ Be open to seeking assistance from external sources, such as therapists and other professionals working with the child.
- ❖ Be willing to work with the child's family in a respectful and empathetic way. This may be particularly challenging when you think the child's parents may have contributed to the sexual abuse of the child.
- ❖ You need to understand your feelings about the situation in order to be able to effectively help the child. It may be helpful to discuss your feelings with other foster parents. Any conversations should focus on your feelings or reactions and respect the confidentiality of the child and his or her family.

(Adapted from Keefer, et al., 2000)

MANAGING CHILD BEHAVIORS

Appropriate discipline focuses on helping children understand what they have done wrong and then teaches them new ways to work through their emotions or problems. Discipline in foster homes cannot involve physical punishment and should be approached as a method of **teaching** rather than a method of **punishment**. Discipline should also be appropriate to the action and not excessive.

Prohibited Forms of Discipline

Ch. DCF 56, Adm. Code, the foster care licensing rule, includes information about discipline by a foster parent. More specifically, s. DCF 56.09(5) prohibits the following forms of discipline:

- ❖ Physical punishment of any type.
- ❖ Verbal abuse, profanity, derogatory remarks about the child or his or her family, or threats to expel the child from the home.
- ❖ Allowing another child or adult other than the licensed foster parents to discipline a foster child.
- ❖ Withholding meals, mail, or family interaction.
- ❖ Punishment or ridicule for bedwetting or other lapses in toilet training.
- ❖ Mechanical restraint or locking a foster child in **ANY** enclosed area.
- ❖ Restricting foster children to unlocked spaces beyond what is specifically outlined in Ch. DCF 56 for the purposes of a time-out (this is discussed in the next section).

It is important to keep in mind that many children in foster care have been neglected and abused. Due to their past experiences, these children may respond very differently to being disciplined than other children. As previously discussed, children may be reacting to placement or stages of grief. They may have experienced little or no discipline, severe punishment, or inconsistent discipline.

Discipline Techniques

There is no one magic way of managing children's behaviors. Things that work with one child may not work with another child. It is important to constantly seek out additional information and training to meet the changing needs of the children. Below are some techniques and ideas from experienced foster parents regarding discipline.

Discussion

Communicate needs and expectations to children. Anticipate a potential problem and discuss what the consequences will be. Clearly state, "If this happens, we will do this...." or, "When you are not ready in the morning, we are all late...." Hold family meetings and allow for open communication.

Modeling

Demonstrate and model the behavior that the child should be doing in the home. Have other children in the home help model behavior; actions speak louder than words.

Reinforce Good Behavior

Try to point out something the child does well every day. Encourage efforts as well as accomplishments. Let the child know when he or she has controlled his or her behavior well. Chart progress, and reinforce, reinforce, reinforce. Rewards can take the form of small treats, smiles, extra attention, or special privileges.

Natural or Logical Consequences

Unless it is too dangerous or costly, let the child learn the consequences of his or her actions. If a child breaks one of his or her toys, then he or she will not have it later. If a teen is cruel or rude to others, he or she will not have many friends.

Logical consequences are tied directly to the misbehavior or action. If a child writes on a wall, the consequence is that he or she cleans that wall. If a teen fails to get up for school in the morning, he or she will receive a detention, suspension, or other consequences from the school.

Planned Ignoring

Sometimes the best response is no response. This should only be used when the behaviors do not pose a safety threat. Some children only received attention in the past when they acted out, so try to reinforce positive behavior. Foster parents should also be aware of a child's history when using this intervention. If a child's parent ignored their needs, ignoring a child may make the situation worse.

Have House Rules

Foster parents should explain the house and family rules to all new children, with the rules also written down and possibly posted somewhere in the home. Remember that it takes time for children to adjust to a new home and fully understand and remember the rules.

Loss of privileges

Effective discipline may include taking away privileges such as television time, computer access, video games, and time with friends. When using this form of discipline, it is important to explain why the privilege was taken away and how the child can react differently or make a better choice next time.

The loss of a privilege must also be appropriate to the child's level of understanding and needs. If a child has problems making friends and breaks a rule before he or she is about to go to a movie with a friend, an alternative might be that the child has his or her friend over to the home but not out to the movies instead of taking away the child's time with his or her friend completely.

Time-Out

The main goal of a time-out is to help a child gain self control. It is important to plan ahead with a child where time-outs will occur. Time-outs should occur in a quiet place where the child will not get the attention of others or be distracted. Time-outs are most effective with younger children, especially when the child can be moved away from the item, situation, or person that he or she is reacting to.

Wisconsin's Rules for Time-Out

Section DCF 56.09(5)(i) in Ch. DCF 56, Adm. Code, gives clear direction about how time outs, or room restrictions, are to be used for foster children.

- ❖ Children under 6 years of age may not be placed in a time-out for longer than **10** minutes at a time.
- ❖ Children 6 to 10 years of age may not be placed in a time-out for longer than **30** minutes at a time.
- ❖ Children over 10 years may not be placed in a time-out for longer than **60** minutes at a time.

During this time, the room or area the child is in must remain unlocked, and the child must be allowed to use the toilet if necessary. The child must also be within hearing of a responsible caretaker.

DAILY CARE NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Education

Foster parents have a very important role in the education of the children in their care. Foster parents are expected to make sure the children in their home attend school and keep up with their school work and activities. It is the caseworker's responsibility to receive the necessary signatures and consents from the child's parents (such as special education classes).

In most situations, the child's parent retains his or her parental rights to approve the child's individualized education plans and generally make important decisions about the child's educational life.

Early childhood education can help young children both academically and socially. By introducing educational programming early in a child's life, any developmental and social concerns can be addressed and help catch a child up to his or her peers. Children from birth to 3 years old who have been substantiated as abused or neglected must be referred to the local Birth to 3 Program to assess their developmental needs. If the child in the foster home hasn't been screened by the Birth to 3 Program yet, the child's caseworker will arrange for the screening.

All foster children 3-5 years old qualify for Head Start educational programming, and, in some communities, younger children will qualify for Early Head Start programs. Speak with the child's caseworker to see how Head Start or Early Head Start could benefit the foster children.

Sometimes children have behavioral and academic needs. Children with educational needs often have a special plan called an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) to address those needs. Some teens placed in foster care attend alternative educational programming at a location other than the local public school. Foster parents may need to provide additional support for children with educational needs. Foster parents are expected to work with school personnel to help the child.

Health and Medical

Medical Assistance

Each child in foster care has medical coverage, either through Wisconsin's Medical Assistance program (MA) or their parent's health insurance. The child's parent or guardian typically signs a form authorizing medical care for the child. The child's parent should remain involved in medical decisions for their child. This form should be provided to the foster parent when a child is placed or soon after. If a foster parent does not receive the child's medical authorization form or if the child's parent or

guardian fails to authorize medical care for the child, it is the agency's responsibility to assure that the child gets all required health services.

If the child is covered under the parent's policy, the insurance provider may need to be contacted prior to appointments to verify coverage or confirm that a provider is approved to provide services. If the child is covered by MA, the foster parent will receive a medical assistance card for the child which must be presented each time the child has an appointment for services covered by Medical Assistance.

Health Check

According to foster home licensing standards, foster parents are also responsible for meeting the health and dental needs of the foster children in their home. Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program (EPSDT) requirements — also known in Wisconsin as HealthCheck — require that a child covered by Medical Assistance have a specific number of physical and dental screens every year, depending upon the child's age.

Foster parents must arrange a HealthCheck screen within 30 days after a child's placement in their home. The actual medical appointment may take place later than 30 days depending upon when an appointment is available and when the child's next regular check-up should be. If a child had a medical appointment within the past couple of months, he or she may not need another appointment until the next recommended HealthCheck appointment unless the child has a medical condition needing attention.

When a child has a medical or dental appointment, foster parents need to give the health care provider the appropriate forms. Many of these forms are specific to the individual agency. The foster home licensor or child's caseworker should explain the agency's forms, those documents and items that must be taken to the appointment, and the documents that must be returned to the caseworker.

Immunization

Wisconsin has an immunization law which requires children in daycare centers and students through grade 12 to be immunized against certain diseases. Waivers are available for reasons of religion, medical history, or personal conviction. Foster parents should talk with the child's caseworker to find out what immunizations the child may need, if any, and get the child vaccinated as soon as possible.

Emergency Medical Care

When a child is placed in foster care, the caseworker requests that the child's parents sign an "Authorization to Consent to Medical Treatment" form. If signed, this allows foster parents to authorize emergency medical care only when the parents cannot be contacted. If the child's parent is able, he or she should authorize medical care. In situations when the child's parents refuse, the court can appoint a limited guardian who can authorize the necessary medical care for the child.

Refer to s. DCF 56.09(4) in Ch. DCF 56, Adm. Code, for more information about licensing requirements regarding the health care of children in foster care.

Specialized Hair and Skin Care

It is essential to a child's sense of identity and self-esteem that they are cared for and well-groomed. Children notice the views or reactions of other people, and those reactions can impact how the child sees him or herself.

When foster parents are caring for foster children of a different ethnicity, the child's hair and skin care practices may be completely unfamiliar. For example, to cut the hair of an Indian child is considered a sign of disrespect to the child, his or her family and tribe. Additionally, children of color have hair types and textures that may require different products or care. Using hair care products that are inappropriate or washing hair daily can damage a child's hair which will impact not only the child's appearance but also the child's self-esteem.

It is essential for foster parents to develop the knowledge and skills needed to care for the child's hair and skin. The best way to gain this knowledge is for foster parents to talk with the child and the child's family to gather their suggestions or thoughts about how to care for the child's skin and hair. This will give a foster parent specific information regarding the child placed in his or her home and is also a mechanism for building a relationship with the child's family.

If consulting with the child's family is not possible, foster parents should contact a beautician that specializes in hair and skin care specific to the child's background for advice and recommendations. For Indian children, foster parents should consult with a member of the child's identified tribe. The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center, at www.wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-762-8063, also has several books and other resources about caring for the skin and hair for children of color.

Safety

In addition to providing safe care and supervision of children, foster parents must child-proof their home according to the requirements in licensing standards and educate children about safety in their home. While the foster parent's children have grown up with their rules to help keep them safe, a foster child may not know these rules. The chart on the next page highlights some safety requirements foster homes must follow.

Safety Issues of Special Note

Firearms: Make sure firearms are always unloaded and kept in a locked cabinet, inaccessible to curious children. Ammunition **MUST** be locked up and stored separately from the firearms.

Cleaning Supplies and Medications: Keep all medications, poisons, matches, cigarette lighters, household cleaning supplies, nail polish remover, pesticides, and painting supplies in places where children cannot access them.

Fire Safety: Go over the evacuation routes in your home with your foster child within the first several days of placement. Review these routes with the whole family every three months so that everyone knows how to get out of each room. Check smoke detectors every month, and keep them in working order. Evacuation plans should be posted in the home and a place for everyone to meet if evacuation is necessary must be identified (e.g., a neighbor's porch).

Child Safety and Automobile Requirements: By law, infants under 1 year or less than 20 pounds must be in a rear-facing safety seat in the back seat. Children 1 to 4 years old or less than 40 lbs. must be in a forward-facing child seat in the back seat. Children from ages 4 to 8 and between 40 – 80 pounds must be buckled into booster seats. After age 8 or if children weigh more than 80 pounds, they must wear a seat belt at all times.

Never buy a used child safety seat or booster seat. Child safety seats expire or are recalled at times, so buying a used car seat may be unsafe. Some agencies provide infant seats to foster parents or may know of a service group, hospital, or public health nursing service which can provide a seat. Check with your agency for assistance in locating an appropriate child safety seat.

Other Safety Considerations: Always provide good supervision around swimming pools, rivers, lakes, or other water activities. Check with the agency for policies regarding safety and supervision for other more "hazardous" recreational activities, such as trampolines, horseback riding, recreational vehicles, boating, and waterskiing or tubing.

For more details about the recent changes to the child safety seat requirements, visit the Wisconsin Department of Transportation web site at:

<http://wisconsindot.gov/Pages/safety/education/child-safety/default.aspx>.

Another potential safety hazard for children is recalled or unsafe toys. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission posts lists of recalled toys on a monthly basis on their web site at:

https://www.cpsc.gov/Recalls?combine=toys&=Apply&field_rc_date%5Bdate%5D=&field_rc_date%5Bdate%5D=.

For more information about safety requirements in foster homes, refer to s. 56.08 in Ch. DCF 56, Adm. Code, the foster home licensing standards.

Life Skills Training

Foster parents are encouraged to teach life skills appropriate to the developmental level of children throughout their lives. With constant guidance and support, children are better prepared to live independently when they move out on their own.

Life skills include personal skills such as exploring one's values, making good decisions, working through problems, setting goals, communicating with others, managing time, dealing with anger, and developing self-esteem. Other skills include cooking, shopping, doing laundry, cleaning, being on time, and managing money.

Many daily tasks and things foster parents or other children seem to “just know” may be tasks or skills that a child in foster care needs to learn. Foster parents should work with the children in the foster home to help figure out what skills they already know and what skills you can work on together.

Appendix 2 in Section 6 of this handbook includes a web link to an Independent Living Services checklist that can help foster parents and youth identify the skills youth need to successfully support themselves after foster care.

Religious Education

Foster parents may want to have children involved in religious practices or experiences; however, the child's parents maintain the right to determine the religious or spiritual activities for their child. The child also has the ability to choose what religious activities he or she participates in. If there is no religious tradition in the child's background, foster parents may want to invite the child to participate in their family's religious activities and organizations. However, the child's wishes and the preferences of his or her parents must be respected.

If foster parents have questions about what religious activities a child can participate in, or if there is a difference between what the child wants and what the child's parents want, they should contact the child's caseworker.

For more information about requirements regarding religious activities for children in foster care, refer to s. 56.09(1)(g) in Ch. DCF 56, Adm. Code, the foster home licensing standards.

Recreation

Children should be encouraged to participate in activities with other groups and with the family. Participating in activities outside of the home allows the child to make friends and have new experiences. Foster parents should talk with the children in their home about what they like to do and activities that members of the family like to do. Families should include all children in the activities or hobbies they do together.

For requirements about allowing foster children to participate in community activities, refer to s. 56.09(1)(f) in Ch. DCF 56, Adm. Code, the foster home licensing standards.

Life Books

A **life book** is an account of a child's life in words, pictures, or other significant items, such as certificates or awards, similar to a scrapbook. The purpose of a life book is to connect a child's previous experiences to the child's life at the present. Working with children to record their past in a life book gives them a sense of who they are, where they came from, and what they have been through. When significant events take place, help or ask children if they want to record them in their life books. These events may be important to them when they leave foster care.

The box below gives some examples of information and items that are often included in a child's life book.

Life Books Often Contain:

- ❖ Snapshots of the child, relatives, friends, and pets.
- ❖ Pictures of places that were or are meaningful.
- ❖ Growth charts.
- ❖ School records and achievements.
- ❖ Descriptions of likes and dislikes.
- ❖ Origin of the child's name.
- ❖ Special stories from the child's past and present.
- ❖ Family tree.
- ❖ Explanations and descriptions of previous placements.

(Information in this section is adapted from the Iowa Foster Parent Handbook)

FOSTERING TEENS

The most important developmental task of adolescence is becoming independent. Just like other teens, teens placed in foster care have a need to work toward this developmental task. However, they may need a much more structured and consistent environment to achieve this independence.

The box below includes some factors unique to the experiences of teens in foster care that may impact their ability to achieve independence.

Factors Affecting Foster Teens' Ability to Achieve Independence

- ❖ The impact of abuse or neglect on the formation of self image, values, and trust in others.
- ❖ Delayed knowledge and skills due to family chaos, abuse and neglect, or multiple placements.
- ❖ Lack of understanding of personal and family history due to limited or inaccurate information.
- ❖ Lack of a consistent peer group due to placement or multiple moves.
- ❖ Lack of feelings of security and self-worth due to lack of permanent connections or permanence.
- ❖ Inability to identify or express emotions appropriately due to personal and family history.
- ❖ Negative self-concept due to rejection by family, separation and loss, too much responsibility at a young age, placement disruption, being "different" from peers, and abuse and neglect.

(Information in this section is adapted from the Iowa Foster Parent Handbook)

Given these factors, it is important that all parties involved with a teenager work together to develop a plan that will help him or her learn skills to be successful as an adult. Many of those skills are described in the next section.

Additional information and training about fostering teens and building skills teens need for a successful transition to adulthood, can be found in the online foster parent training, called "Building the Path to Independence". The training is available on the Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System Website:

<http://wcpds.wisc.edu/Independent-Living.htm>

Independent Living Skills

Because foster parents are a consistent presence in a teenager's life, they are available on a daily basis to model behavior and provide the guidance, coaching, and feedback teenagers need to become successful adults. Teenagers in foster care who are 14 years of age or older are required to have an Independent Living Plan and Assessment. If foster parents aren't aware of a teenager's Independent Living Plan or Assessment, they should contact the child's caseworker.

Independent living preparation does not begin or end at a specific age. It is a process that begins when children are very young and advances over time. When children are not taught the skills they need for a successful transition to adulthood, they are more likely to experience unemployment, homelessness, imprisonment, or victimization. Some children in foster care may need extra help to learn what it means to be independent and what skills they need to be successful on their own.

Below are some recommendations for working with teenagers to help develop their independent living skills.

Tips for Helping Teens Learn Independent Living Skills

- ❖ Work with the teenager to plan a sample budget.
- ❖ Help the teenager identify sources of assistance in the community, such as the local job center, food pantry, and health clinic.
- ❖ Take the teenager to view apartments for rent in the area. Teach him or her about security issues and how to communicate with a landlord.
- ❖ Have the teenager help the foster parent make meals or ask the teen to plan a meal for the family.
- ❖ Help the teenager understand the difference between wanting something (e.g., a new outfit) and needing something (e.g., to pay the electric bill).
- ❖ Show the teenager how to complete a job application.
- ❖ Help the teenager set up a savings account.
- ❖ In general, look for or create teachable moments for the teenager that will help him or her learn about being responsible and independent.

Teenage Drivers

Getting a driver's license is a major milestone in the life of a teenager. The decision for a teenager in foster care to pursue his or her driver's license should be discussed with the teenager, the teenager's parents, caseworker, foster parent, and any other professionals who may have important information about his or her ability to meet the requirements of having a driver's license.

Specific questions regarding teenage drivers and the law can be answered by the Department of Transportation at the following web site:

<http://wisconsin.gov/Pages/dmv/teen-driver/teen-sfty/index.aspx>.

Jobs

Many teenagers in foster care have part-time jobs, and some may have full-time jobs. The earnings of a teenager in care will not affect the monthly rate paid to a foster parent for meeting the needs of the child. The only exception that exists is when a child is receiving Social Security Income (SSI). If a foster child earns over \$200 per month, half of the amount over \$200 goes back to SSI.

For a teenager in foster care to be able to work, he or she must receive a work permit, which requires a signature from his or her parents, guardian, or foster parent. The caseworker should obtain the necessary signatures for the work permit.

Teens and Sexuality

One of the most challenging parts of parenting teenagers is helping and supporting them as they struggle with questions and challenges regarding sex and sexuality. Teenagers in foster care bring additional dynamics to this issue based on their personal and family histories. It is critical for foster parents to be able to talk about sex and sexuality with teenagers in their homes to assure that the foster children know how to make educated choices and protect themselves.

State foster parent licensing regulations provide some direction when it comes to children in foster care and issues related to sex and sexuality. Section DCF 56.09(1)(d), Adm. Code, states that a foster parent cannot deny a foster child access to confidential family planning services. While this requirement does not require foster parents to actively teach children about birth control, it does require foster parents to give teens placed in their home access to these services and information.

If foster parents have concerns about the dating or sexual behaviors of a teenager placed in their home, they should talk with the teenager's caseworker and family. It might be helpful for everyone involved to talk sensitively with the teenager and help him

or her understand the consequences of dating and sexual contact so he or she can make an educated decision whether to engage in or abstain from sexual activity.

For more information about teenagers and sexuality, visit *The Teens and Kids Open Directory* website, which contains more resources for talking with teenagers about sexual activity from abstinence to contraception. You can find it at: <http://www.dmoz.org/> on the Kids and Teens link under Teen Life and then Sexuality.

Also, contact the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center at www.wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-762-8063 to research and find more information for you regarding this topic area.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

Talking with and supporting foster teenagers as they deal with issues surrounding sex and sexuality can be complicated and uncomfortable for some parents. For teenagers dealing with same-sex attractions or facing questions about gender identity, the topic of sex may become more complex and emotionally charged.

Foster parents may have specific views regarding sexuality, including homosexuality. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed how important it is for foster parents to talk openly with their licensing agency about the kinds of children they can comfortably care for. This is crucial when considering fostering teenagers, since there is a good probability that if you foster teenagers, eventually you will care for a teenager with questions about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity.

The next page includes things to think about or do in order to be sensitive to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (also known as LGBTQ) youth.

Working with LGBTQ Youth

- ❖ Be aware of and sensitive to the safety concerns for LGBTQ youth, which include depression, anxiety, homelessness, victimization from verbal and physical harassment, and higher suicide rates due to societal stigma and isolation.
- ❖ Lay ground rules for physical and emotional safety in the home despite personal values — all foster youth deserve unconditional love, acceptance, and respect.
- ❖ Help youth find a counselor or therapist trained in and sensitive to LGBTQ issues. Participate in counseling with the youth when asked and collaborate with the counselor around recommendations for additional services.
- ❖ Advocate for the foster teen with his or her family, caseworkers, and school personnel.
- ❖ Recognize that, in all likelihood, you already know LGBTQ individuals, but they may not yet have come out to you.
- ❖ Educate yourself and others about LGBTQ youth. Become an ally. Help LGBTQ youth find resources and support in your area, such as local youth groups that are LGBTQ-friendly.
- ❖ Use gender neutral and inclusive language, such as “partner” and “significant other,” and eliminate LGBTQ slurs from your daily conversations.
- ❖ Support transgender young people in their gender expression. Refer to them by the names and pronouns they prefer. Support their choice of attire.
- ❖ Respect the youth’s desire for confidentiality. Follow his or her lead with respect to whether he or she is “out.”

For more information about LGBTQ issues and support, visit:

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) at <http://www.pflag.org/>.

Child Welfare League of America at <http://www.cwla.org/>.

The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center at www.wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-762-8063.

TRANSITIONS FACED BY CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Moving to a New Placement

When a foster child is moving to a new placement (new foster home or pre-adoptive placement), it is important to limit the amount of trauma the child experiences. Regardless of the reason for the move, each move is a loss of relationships and connections for the child. The child and the foster family need time to say goodbye. The foster family may want to do something to honor the child's time with their family (for example, to add something to the child's life book or have a special meal together with the child's favorite foods).

Returning Home

The permanence goal for most foster children is reunification of the child with his or her parents. To meet this goal, most children will have regular interactions with their families throughout their time in foster care. An experienced foster mother suggests that, as the time approaches for the child to move back with his or her birth family, the child should start to take some things home during visits and leave them there as a way to ease the transition. This helps the child understand that he or she is going home.

Transitioning from Foster Care to Adoption

In Wisconsin, the majority of children adopted from the child welfare system are adopted by the foster parents they have been placed with. While this is ideal because the child has learned the routine of the home and has a relationship with his or her foster family, the change from being a child who is in foster care to an adopted child is significant. There are many things foster parents can do to ease the transition from foster care to adoption.

Easing the Transition from Foster Care to Adoption

- ❖ Normalize and allow the child to discuss the conflictual feelings the child may be having about no longer being the birth parents “legal” child.
- ❖ Allow the child to talk about the change and ask questions.
- ❖ Make a plan about post-adoption birth family contact, especially contact with siblings and help the child know and understand the plan.
- ❖ Prepare the child for the legal court proceedings.
- ❖ Seek professional assistance or counseling from a therapist who has experience with and understands the complexities of foster care and adoption.

Aging Out of Foster Care

If the plan for a teenager in foster care is to move out on his or her own after turning age 18 or graduating from high school, the foster parent should work on a transition plan with the child to help prepare the youth for his or her move.

Part of the planning should include helping the teen enroll in BadgerCare Plus, the recent expansion of health care services to teens aging out of foster care. A foster youth must have turned 18 after January 1, 2008 and age out of foster care. There are no costs for a teen to receive benefits, and coverage lasts until they are 26 years of age. Foster parents should ask a teen’s caseworker for more information about how to get a teen enrolled in this very important program.

Tips for Helping Make Transitions to Adulthood

- ❖ Work together to fill in any gaps in his or her life book. These will be important to the teenager later in his or her life.
- ❖ Work together to identify supports and people who will be there to help him or her as a young adult.
- ❖ Help gather last-minute household and personal items needed in his or her apartment.
- ❖ Discuss whether your home can be a place to come back to.



KEY CONCEPTS

CHAPTER 3

- ❖ It is important to understand why a child is in foster care before he or she is placed in your home.
- ❖ It is okay to say “no.” Do not take placement of a child you do not feel comfortable with.
- ❖ The changing roles caused by placement can be especially challenging for relative foster parents, as they transition from grandma or grandpa to “mom” or “dad”.
- ❖ Children often feel an incredible sense of loss and confusion when they are separated from their families, regardless of the reason for placement.
- ❖ Impaired attachment has serious consequences on the individual’s ability to sustain relationships, to become independent, and to develop conscience and self-discipline.
- ❖ Abuse, neglect, and separation can have profound effects on children.
- ❖ When considering the placement of a child who has had multiple placements, carefully think about the child’s need for extra time, attention, patience, and commitment.
- ❖ When children are placed in foster care, the culture of their family or community of origin is often quite different from, or possibly in conflict with, the culture of their foster families.
- ❖ Being predictable and consistent is one of the best ways to help a child who is having difficulty adjusting to placement.
- ❖ Children entering foster care typically react to separation from their families by expressing their feelings through behavior.

- ❖ Interactions, or visits, between the child and his or her family (including any siblings) are required by state policy because they are the best way to maintain critical connections for children.
- ❖ Children in foster care often move through the process of grieving by going from one stage and then back again or even appear to display two stages at one time.
- ❖ A foster child's reaction to his or her experience in foster care will vary from child to child.
- ❖ Changes in permanency plans or life events may impact a child's grieving process and adjustment to placement.
- ❖ Consider the child's triggers to problem behavior as well as your own triggers to reacting to the child.
- ❖ By bringing observations of their behavior to a child's attention, foster parents can help them begin to understand the cause and effect of their behavior and give them ideas about how to react differently.
- ❖ Signs of emotional disturbance may include behaviors and reactions that last too long, are exaggerated, or are consistently inappropriate for the situation or the child's stage of development.
- ❖ Foster parents must be willing and able to provide HIGH LEVELS OF SUPERVISION for children who have been sexually abused or who have histories of acting out sexually.
- ❖ The needs of children in foster care are varied and complex, and there is no one "magic" way of managing their behavior.
- ❖ You must provide for daily care needs such as education, health, religion, recreational, and special grooming assistance in a culturally appropriate way.
- ❖ You must child-proof your home according to the requirements in licensing standards and to educate foster children about safety in your home.
- ❖ A life book can give a child in foster care a sense of identity.
- ❖ Look for or create teachable moments for your teen that will allow him or her opportunities to learn about being responsible and independent.
- ❖ According to Wisconsin law, a foster parent cannot deny a foster child access to confidential family planning services.
- ❖ Be aware of and sensitive to the safety concerns of LGBTQ youth.

- ❖ Transitions are difficult for everyone. Be especially sensitive to children in foster care and make plans to decrease the impact or trauma of the transition.