



Fostering Across Wisconsin

A publication of the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center
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Coping with Uncertainty

Many aspects of life are uncertain for children in care. Before they were removed from their home they may have faced chaos, instability, moves, and changes in who lived in their family home. Parental behavior may have been unpredictable. In the mind of a child who is in care, uncertainty and the unknown may be linked to traumatic events.

The uncertainty of our current times gives children even more reason to feel unsteady. The COVID-19 pandemic creates the stress of the unknown for **all** families, and that can't help but affect children in care. Daily routines have likely changed. School is different. Activities and trips are canceled. Parents may be working from home, or their schedules may be different. Illness in the family can be frightening.

While the current situation has some mystery, there is much you can do to reassure the child in your care. Keep in mind that you may not hear children verbalize their struggles; rather their

feelings may come out in behavior. If kids *do* verbalize their feelings, or ask questions, do your best to address them in a simple, developmentally appropriate way.

If the children in your care aren't verbalizing their struggles, you may be able to identify the fight, flight, or freeze responses of trauma and respond accordingly. Outbursts, withdrawal, or defiance are signs that kids may have been triggered.

Take heart. We understand that many families are facing major changes in their day-to-day lives because of the coronavirus pandemic. With all the unknowns, it is absolutely understandable to feel anxious about the "what ifs" and what the future may look like. Know that you are not alone and that there is hope. This issue of *Fostering Across Wisconsin* is filled with resources for your parenting toolbox and hope for better days ahead for you and your family.



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Coping Strategies for Families

During these uncertain times, you may need to make adjustments to your usual style of family management. Here are some ideas for changing things up:

- **Lower your expectations.** Things you thought were doable, even just a few months ago, may no longer be realistic.
- **Be flexible, while maintaining a few daily routines.** While an ordered, routine life is often easier for traumatized kids, there may be times when you just have to go with the moment and adjust accordingly.
- **Focus on the present and teach your kids to do the same.** Engage in spontaneous activities. Get outside. Make time to play inside. Help children see that right here, right now, we can experience joy.
- **Accept kids where they're at.** Regression is normal when kids feel more than the usual amount of pressure.
- **Encourage open communication, while limiting exposure to the news and social media.** It is your job to correct inaccuracies and misinformation kids receive from others.
- **Spend one-on-one time** with each child in your family in order to check in to see how they are really doing.
- **Have family meetings** where anxieties or stressors can be brought up in the context of household expectations, and then respond and adjust.



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Building

RESILIENCE

In “[Removed](#),” a movie about foster care, we watch the main character, Zoe, experience many hardships adjusting to being in care. Zoe is triggered by events that bring her trauma front and center. At times Zoe is unable to manage her emotions or her behavior, even while she is aware that her actions are working against her. Why is it that some children flourish despite the challenges of foster care, while other children struggle? Resilience may be the answer.

Resilience means having a good outcome despite adversity. When life presents us with difficult situations, our ability to overcome those challenges depends on the level of our resilience. You may have noticed that the children in your care have different levels of resilience; some may have a lot, while others may be not as much.

What Determines How Much Resilience a Child Has?

We can think of resilience as a seesaw. On one side of the seesaw there are *risk factors*, and on the other side, *protective factors*. Whichever side weighs more will determine how resilient a child is.

When we think of the *risk factors* for children who have been removed from their homes, we think of the loss from separation, the adjustment to living with a different family, and the lingering effects of trauma. It is certainly no stretch to recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic and the surrounding fears add to the risk factors for children in foster care. The following are just a few of the challenges that might negatively affect the resilience of kids in care during the pandemic:



- Visitation may be largely virtual
- The health of family members is at risk
- School may be a very different experience, including hours of online learning and fewer social interactions with peers

On the other side of the seesaw are *protective factors* that increase resilience. The good news is that there are many things foster parents can do to enhance the protective factors for the children in their care. Also, it's important for children to build resilience as early in life as possible, so you have a wonderful window of opportunity to help with this as a foster parent.

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Building Resilience, continued

How Can We Help a Child Grow More Resilient?

When we talk about how to help grow resilience, we can think about things like temperament, ability to attach, placement stability and positive cultural identity.

While much of an individual's temperament is hereditary, we can help a child shape their temperament. For example, a child can learn how to manage their emotional reactions. This is sometimes called "self-regulation." Maybe the child in your care has melt-downs each morning when they're getting ready for school. You know that how you respond can help the child self-regulate. That response might mean reacting calmly to outbursts or giving the child extra time to get ready. You might also model self-soothing techniques such as slow breathing. These responses on your part can help a child learn to self-regulate and improve their temperament.



Regarding placement stability, we know that each time a child is moved it is traumatizing. Moving often is a *risk factor* for children in care, whereas staying in one placement until reunification or permanence is a *protective factor*. We know that for resilience in children, the single most important factor is having at least one stable and supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver, or adult. So, as a foster parent, YOU may be the number one resilience builder for the child in your care! Your personal qualities as a parent can be a huge part of the equation. These include a positive parent-child relationship, openness in communication, and specific parental

characteristics, such as warmth, empathy, responsiveness, and positive discipline.

What are Societal Protective Factors?

Societal protective factors may seem a little more out of your area of influence as a foster parent; however, there are still some things you can do. Factors seen as "societal" include family involvement in the community, peer relationships, access to quality childcare and schools, as well as to health care and mental health services, and, lastly, societal acceptance of a child's culture. An example of a factor you could influence might be advocating for a specific therapy that you think would be a great fit for the child in your care.

Another *societal protective factor* you could influence could be connecting the child of color in your care with his or her culture. Support the specific culture and ethnicity by volunteering at local cultural events as a

family when it is safe to do so. The child will not only feel firsthand how much your family lifts him up in the context of culture, but also how much the community does as well.

Resilience is in flux over our lifetimes, but the stronger it is early on, the better. The children in our care deserve our best efforts at minimizing risk factors and building protective factors. Resilience can be the key to a child thriving and fulfilling their dreams.



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Tips to Ease Anxiety

There's a lot of news coverage about COVID-19 that can be overwhelming for parents and frightening to kids. The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents and others who work closely with children to filter information and talk about coronavirus in a way that children can understand.

1. **Provide reassurance.**

Remind children that researchers and doctors are learning as much as they can, as quickly as they can, about the virus, and are taking steps to keep everyone safe.

2. **Give them control.**

It's also a great time to remind children of what they can do to help stay healthy, such as washing their hands often, coughing into a tissue or their sleeves, and getting enough sleep.

3. **Watch for signs of anxiety.**

Children may not always have the words to express their worries to you. As a foster parent or relative caregiver, you may see behavioral signs. They may have emotional or behavioral outbursts, experience sleeping difficulties, or seem distracted. Keep the child's pediatrician or primary care doctor (and caseworker) updated regarding any changes you observe in your household.



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The Importance of Routines & Schedules During Times of Uncertainty

In times of uncertainty, it can be easy to feel as though everything is out of control. While there are things that we cannot control, having some predictability with schedules and routines will not only help you and your children anticipate what's coming, it will also create feelings of safety and security. In addition, it can help reduce feelings of anxiety and stress.

It's important to work together to create a daily routines, which may include a daily schedule. Below are a few simple tips to help you get started:

- Maintain regular mealtimes when the family can eat together at least once a day
- Establish consistent sleep schedules
- Set up a study space to encourage ongoing learning and completing educational assignments
- Consider limiting technology usage, while still allowing use to keep children and youth connected to their families. Social distancing does not mean social isolation.

- Maintain family connections. If in-person visits are not available, implement virtual visits or telephone calls. Reach out to the child's caseworker for support and assistance to maintain the child's connection with their family.

Being a foster parent or relative caregiver has always been a challenging responsibility. Remember to be generous and compassionate with yourself. COVID-19 has changed all of our lives in many different ways. We are all doing our best to make changes and adjustments to our daily routines. While creating schedules and routines will be helpful, know that it's okay to acknowledge that the new normal is *not* normal. Be understanding of the fact that it's going to take time for everyone to adjust.

Finally, give yourself permission to be flexible. There will be days that don't necessarily go as planned. Remember that tomorrow is a new day, which means a new opportunity to try again.



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Resources

Tip Sheets

- [After the Storm: Tips to Help Restore Calm](#)
- [Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships](#)
- [What do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [Tips for Positive Parenting](#)

Other Library Resources

- Creative Coping Skills for Children: Emotional Support through Arts and Crafts Activities
- Chill and Spill
- Helping Children Cope with Crisis: An Activity Book for African American Families
- Helping Children to Cope with Change, Stress, and Anxiety
- The Yes Brain: How to Cultivate Courage, Curiosity, and Resilience in Your Child
- My Story: Resilience and Redemption
- Trauma-Proofing Your Kids—A Parent’s Guide for Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience
- In Their Own Words: Reflections on Parenting Children with Mental Health Issues

Courses & Webinars

- [Youth & Mental Health](#)
- [The Brain and Body Connection: Grounding Ourselves in Unsettling Times](#)

Additional Web Resources

- [Wisconsin Regional Therapist Lists](#)
- [Sesame Street in Communities](#)
- [Living in Uncertain Times: Coping with a New “Normal”](#)
- [How to Help Children Build Resilience in Uncertain Times](#)
- [Guidance for Children and Families Involved with the Child Welfare System During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Staying Resilient During COVID-19](#)
- [How You and Your Child Build Resilience: Coping During COVID-19](#)
- [How to Talk to Your Anxious Child or Teen about Coronavirus](#)
- [Helping Children Cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

The team at the Wisconsin Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center are always here for additional information, resources, and support.

Please contact us at:

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