

Helping Teens in Care Transition to Adulthood

The potential for teens in foster care is limitless. Many former youth in care have accomplished amazing things and achieved great success as valued members of their community. Like most successful adults, these teens owe their success to the caring and concerned adults in their life, including foster parents, who helped shepherd them along the path to successful adulthood.

For some children and youth, the time they spend in out-of-home care happens to be during years that are critical to a person's development. This is especially true for teenagers. The teenage years are essential for developing independent living skills and gaining experience that will be the foundation for self-sufficient living as an adult.

The challenges of finding a job and a safe place to live, while performing the basic living skills of cooking, cleaning, managing money, and taking care of their health, can be daunting for teens who have little practical experience in providing for themselves and who are unsure of who they can turn to for ongoing support. This makes the role of foster parents all the more critical, as they address the challenge of preparing teens for their first successful steps into adulthood.

Reflect back on when you were getting ready to launch into adulthood. Was it an easy transition, or did you experience some

“bumps in the road,” or life lessons along your journey? Did you have a family support network and access to the necessary resources to guide you along your journey?

Most 18-year-olds are still largely dependent upon their parents or their family support system to provide support, assistance, and guidance before, during, and after they transition into adulthood. As foster parents, you have the opportunity to help guide and prepare teenagers in your care for this new and uncharted journey.

Even though youth in care receive independent living skills from the Independent Living Skills Program (ILP), as foster parents, you can help the youth in your care by providing life skills training at your home to further reinforce the skills they are learning through ILP.

Teaching Teens Life Skills

As foster parents, don't be surprised to receive a call or text from former youth in your care who asks “Why did all my t-shirts turn pink after I washed them?” or “I didn't realize that putting a metal bowl in the microwave would cause so much damage,” or “I lost my job and I do not know how to file for unemployment, can you please help me?”

Following are just a few of the many skills youth need as adults:

- Search for a self-supporting job



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- How to apply for a job
- Preparing for a job interview
- Completing a resume
- How to keep a job
- Money management skills; such as opening checking and savings accounts at a bank, credit union, or other financial institution
- Bill-paying techniques—how to keep track of when bills are due, how to pay them, and how to manage household budgets
- How to find safe and affordable housing
- What a rental lease agreement entails
- Explaining a security deposit
- How to access physical and mental health care resources
- Cooking and nutritional skills
- Cleaning skills such as laundry and day-to-day house cleaning skills



they graduate from high school and until age 21. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families has [a comprehensive list of resources](#) that may help you and the youth in your care.

Practical Tips for Increasing Independent Living Skills

Many former foster youth who age out of care face negative outcomes as adults. Foster parents can help the teens in their care reach their full potential and avoid those negative outcomes. With the help, care, and guidance of foster parents, teens can learn the skills they need to make it on their

own. The following are some tips to help foster parents develop those strategies.

- *Start early*
The process of helping teens build independent living skills should start as early as possible. Even if a youth in care exits the system through reunification with his birth family or through adoption, the time he spends with his foster family (ies) is critical to his development. Actively looking for ways to build independent living skills from the day a child joins their family will help foster parents ensure that he has the foundation to build on as he moves through his teen years into adulthood.
- *Offer opportunities to make decisions*
Policy changes such as Reasonable and Prudent Parenting have made it easier for foster families to support decision-making with the teens in their care. These policy changes make it easier to allow teens to

Building Connections to Life Skill Resources

By providing youth with connections to local and statewide resources, you will be providing the transitioning teens in your care life skills that will help them in the days and years to come. Community resources are available to youth who are leaving foster care, including such things as food stamps, Medicaid (which teens aging out of care continue to remain eligible to receive), local food pantries, post-secondary educational resources, transitions to long term care, and local housing resources. As a helpful reminder, teens who have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) are eligible to continue living in their foster homes after

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engage in “normal teen activities.” Being transported by neighbors or friends (not just the foster family, as in the past), and engaging in social activities, such as sleepovers and school social events, are just a few examples.

Foster parents have a unique opportunity to help build decision-making skills by giving teens choices whenever possible and allowing the youth to learn from the consequences—good or bad—of their choices. A small example might include giving the teen a choice as to what time they are expected to go to bed while helping them understand that they are required to wake up at a certain time the next morning for school.

Another example might be allowing the teen to have flexibility in how they spend their free time after school while helping them understand that they have to also take

care of any chores and finish their homework. As the teen grows older, try to increase the complexity of choices and flexibility, while still maintaining safe and appropriate boundaries. By involving the teens and young adults in your care in decision-making opportunities, you are equipping them to make healthy and appropriate choices in the future—even if there is no one there to guide them.

- *Increase expectations and responsibilities*

It is often said that children rise to meet expectations, and, far too often, teens in foster care hear more about their



limitations than their potential. However, foster parents can help increase a teen’s confidence level by raising expectations and increasing responsibilities. An example might be to give the teen the responsibility of planning a family meal one night a week. Next, they can go along with you to the grocery store to pick out ingredients, then help prepare the meal, until, eventually, they can complete the whole process on their own.

Another example might be helping a teen establish a budget for things they might want, such as going out with friends or a new app for their phone. Then helping them complete the steps needed to earn

the funds for the budget, whether it’s by completing extra chores for an increased allowance or getting a work permit and part-time job.

Foster parents might also help youth in their care set goals for academic

achievement, behavior, and conduct in the community. Over time, use consistency and gentle reminders to help encourage them to meet—and exceed—their goals. With proper guidance, teens can achieve goals, exceed expectations, and build a sense of personal empowerment that will allow them to face future challenges.

- *Look for every day teachable moments*
There are many tasks in our day-to-day adult lives that we take for granted but that are, nonetheless, essential. We typically learn these skills from our parents or through experience. From

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doing laundry to balancing a checkbook, navigating public transportation or maintaining a home, some teens exit foster care with very little practical experience with these essential skills. As a result, they may struggle to navigate the daily realities of being a responsible adult.

Foster parents can look for ways to include teens in these day to day tasks as a means to build these independent living skills. For example, include the youth in reviewing the various monthly household bills and show them how to create and manage a budget. Other examples can include taking them on a tour of the city or town using public transportation, inviting them to your local bank to talk with an account manager about the various types of banking accounts, and making sure they participate in chores and home maintenance projects.

- ♦ *Celebrate successes, learn from shortcomings*
Although teens often don't show it, they crave approval and recognition from the adults in their lives. It's important for foster parents, as role models, to look for opportunities to celebrate successes—both big and small—with the youth in their care. Even if those accomplishments start out small, it's important to show children and youth that there are adults in their lives who care about their achievements and are invested in them doing well.



Foster parents should look for ways to celebrate successes in ways that are meaningful to the teen. This can include going out to their favorite restaurant or participating in an activity together, like going to the movies, playing sports, or working on a craft.

On the other hand, it is also important for foster parents to acknowledge when a youth in their care falls short of expectations. When this happens, it is helpful to respond with compassion and guidance that will teach teens coping skills and resiliency. Finding time to talk daily about experiences, successes, and challenges can be beneficial.

The Importance of Co-Parenting

When reunification with the birth family is a permanency goal, co-parenting

with the birth parents is an essential component to successfully parenting a teen in foster care. Whenever possible, try to seek feedback from birth parents on the strategies being used in the foster home and at the birth parent's home to parent the teen and teach the essential skills of successful daily living. Sharing the teen's challenges and successes with the birth parents will help them stay connected with their child and may even shed some light on factors and family conditions that could be influencing the teen's behavior.

This kind of communication can also be a means of modeling effective parenting practices for birth parents that will help grow

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their parenting skills, reduce the likelihood of the teen re-entering out-of-home care, and minimize some of the anxiety foster parents feel when a child leaves their home.

Additionally, when teens are able to see a healthy partnership between their birth parents and foster parents, it can have a profound impact on their sense of wellbeing and security.

Foster Parents Are the Key

The task of preparing teens to leave the foster system is a challenging one. However, seeing a teen learn and grow and take those first successful steps into adulthood is very rewarding. Foster parents, you are the key to that teen's success!



Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Parenting at the Speed of Teens: Positive Tips on Everyday Issues*, by Peter Benson
- *Sex, Drugs 'n Facebook—A Parent Toolkit for Promoting Healthy Internet Use*, by Megan A. Moreno
- *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, by David Walsh
- *On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*
- *Life After Foster Care—100 Things I've Learned*, by Georgette Todd

Tip Sheets

- [Fostering Older Youth](#)
- [Being an Ally for LGBTQ Youth](#)

Additional Coalition Resource

- [Resources for Youth in Care](#)

Additional Resources

- [Youth in Transition: Transitions to Adult Long-term Care](#)
- [Youth Services Paying for College](#)
- [Teen and Young Adult Resources](#)
- [Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood: Guidance for Foster Parent](#)
- [Helping Youth Prepare for the Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [15 Things to Help a Foster Youth Transition into Adulthood](#)
- [Transition and Aging Out](#)
- [5 Things to Know about the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood](#)