



# FOSTER CARE INFORMATION

**Thank you for deciding to learn more about becoming a foster family! The process of fostering can be emotional and complex, and it can also be very rewarding. We designed this packet to provide you with information about foster care. As you read through the steps involved, remember that the Wisconsin Family Connections Center staff are here to support, encourage, and assist you throughout your journey. You are welcome to call us at 1-800-762-8063, visit our website, [wifamilyconnectionscenter.org](http://wifamilyconnectionscenter.org), or e-mail us at [info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org](mailto:info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org) at any time.**

## **GETTING STARTED**

You probably have many questions about how to start the process of becoming a foster parent. What are the requirements? What are the demographics of children and youth in foster care? What is the time frame for getting licensed? There are probably many more questions in your mind, and we are here to help provide those answers.

## **WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?**

Foster care is temporary care for children who cannot live with their families because of safety concerns. Children in foster care may live with relatives, like kin, or with unrelated foster parents. Public, private, and tribal child welfare agencies license foster families and manage the safety and well-being of the children placed in foster care.

The primary goal of foster care is reunification. When reunification is not possible, alternative permanency goals are considered. Foster parents play a critical role by caring for the children and establishing a working relationship with the families and agencies in the interim. Most children in foster care return home to their families. When children cannot return home, they find permanence primarily through guardianship or adoption by a relative or their identified foster/adoptive family.

Some of the primary responsibilities of a foster parent are:

- Provide a safe and nurturing environment.
- Promote normalcy and personal growth and improve well-being by including children in the family's daily activities and allowing them to participate in everyday activities without agency barriers.
- Support contact between children and their birth families/caregivers; establish working relationships with birth families/caregivers to co-parent children, facilitate connection, and provide transportation to and from visits when possible.
- Advocate for the children in all applicable domains (identity formation, maintaining connections, school, medical/developmental/behavioral health, etc.)
- Communicate and work closely with your licensing professional and the family's child welfare professional and team regarding progress and concerns.
- Arrange and take the children to medical and dental appointments.

## **CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

Children in Wisconsin's foster care system range between 0 and 18 (can be voluntarily extended to 21 for those who qualify). The length of time a child will spend in foster care varies case by case. Some children are in care for one day, others for many years; each child's case is different.

Children are placed in foster care for different reasons. Some examples include a child who has been abandoned, a child who is the victim of abuse or neglect, a child who is at high risk of harm (a sibling of a child who was abused or neglected), a child whose parent is incarcerated or hospitalized, a child who has significant medical or mental health needs, or a child who has committed a juvenile offense.

Some of the primary responsibilities of foster parents are:

- To ensure that the child's basic needs are met and the child is safe from further abuse or neglect.
- To provide temporary care, stability, and normalcy for children.
- To help children and families stay connected.
- To support the family unit to get children home and with their families. When that is not possible, support the family unit until an alternative permanence goal has been achieved.

## **REQUIREMENTS**

Minimum qualifications to become a foster parent include:

- You must be 21 years of age or older.
- You may be single, married, divorced, widowed, or in a significant long-term partnership.
- Your physical and mental health conditions do not interfere with your ability to provide care for a child.
- You must be financially able to provide for your family.
- You and your family must participate in the home study process, which will be completed by a licensing worker from the agency you are seeking a foster care license from.
- You must pass criminal background checks.
- Your home must comply with standards established by the State of Wisconsin.
- You must be able to provide proof of insurance (e.g., homeowner's or renter's insurance and automobile insurance)
- You must complete proper training requirements within specified timelines; training may sometimes require travel.

## **TIME FRAME**

The time it takes to become a licensed foster parent varies but generally takes at least two to three months to complete. You must complete the required pre-placement training during the

home study process or shortly after completion. After completing that training, you will be issued your foster care license and can begin to accept placement of children in your home. Foster care licenses can be issued for up to two years and can be renewed.

## **PROCESS**

Your first step in becoming licensed as a foster parent is to contact the Foster Care Coordinator in your county or a private child placing agency. Once you have reached the agency to begin the process, you and your family will be asked to complete an application if you wish to pursue becoming licensed as a foster parent. You can start the home study process when your application is reviewed and accepted.

## **HOME STUDY**

The State of Wisconsin requires using the SAFE Home Study licensing tool. As part of the home study process, you must complete an application and participate in a series of personal interviews in your home. Your licensing professional will:

- Gather information about your parenting skills and assess your ability to care for children with various needs and trauma responses.
- Discuss why you are interested in fostering and assess how fostering may impact you and your family.
- Complete a thorough criminal background check on every member ten years of age and older living in the home.
- Complete reference checks on your family.
- Inspect your home to ensure that it satisfies the State's requirements to meet the needs of the children in foster care.

The home study also allows you and your family to ask questions or voice concerns.

## **TRAINING REQUIREMENTS**

Training requirements are divided into three phases:

- **Pre-Placement:** To be completed before a child is placed in a family's home.
- **Initial:** To be completed within the first period of licensure.
- **Ongoing:** To be completed every year after the first period of licensure.

The number of training hours and curriculum is dependent on your certification level.

## **WE BELONG TOGETHER: A FAMILY STORY**

We are sisters and live together but don't live with our brothers. We live in Wisconsin, and our brothers live in Illinois. We were sent to foster care a year ago and separated from our older brothers. Our brothers couldn't live in the same foster home as us because our foster

mom only had room for two kids in her truck.

Kids are sent to foster care because they or their parents need time to figure things out.

We were sent because our mom needed some time to herself. Our foster mom is nice and gives us a lot of attention, but we miss our brothers.

It's hard for us to keep close relationships with our brothers because we don't see each other very often. Instead, we have to write letters and call each other on the phone. We are luckier than some separated foster kids because we get to visit our brothers about once a month. When we are with our brothers, we try to do everything together. They make us feel safe and loved and are the kind of guys you can count on whenever you need help or are lonely.

It is possible that we will never live with our brothers again, which makes us sad. But if we do live with them again, we will probably have a very good relationship because being away from each other makes us appreciate each other more. The time we do have together is very precious.

## **BIRTH PARENT TESTIMONIAL**

I was a young single mother and was having great difficulty parenting my overactive son. I began to do things that I still regret.

One day, my child left for daycare and did not come home to me. I was frantic because I did not know where my son was and had no contact with him for over two weeks. I felt that a part of me was lost, and I did not know if I would ever get it back. I knew I wasn't a bad person and that I had made mistakes, but I loved my son and wanted to do what was right. I just needed help. My son went to a foster family who helped us both. They cared about how I was doing and meeting my son's needs. I have had my son back for three years now.

As you consider becoming a foster parent, remember that birth parents do love and care about their children. Please try to understand the circumstances the child's parents are going through. With compassion and love in your hearts for the parents and their children, you will be an important part of rebuilding a family.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOSTER PARENT**

I learned that a parent's love is priceless and cannot be substituted, so I shouldn't try. I also learned that healing their wounds did not heal their hearts. Stopping their hunger did not stop their longing.

To any new foster parent, I would like to say: "Each child is precious and unique and will need something different from you. Every child needs you to respect their birth family and their culture. No child needs you to save them; they just need you to hold them tight until the storm passes."

## **MY EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE**

My life was rough growing up. I had an alcoholic father and a manic-depressive mother. I had gotten into the wrong crowd and made a lot of bad choices.

After a time, my parents decided it would be best if I were to go 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 was the day my whole life changed.

What helped most was having someone who made me believe in myself, who helped me to believe that I could do anything as long as I put my mind to it. 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 choosing to make a difference in the life of a child.

## **SELF-REFLECTION**

We know this is a lot of information to digest. You may wonder if this is right for you and your family. We recommend reading the articles and tip sheets noted in the Resource Appendix of this booklet. Take some time to assess your feelings. Consider what responsibilities you would take on as a foster parent and also the goals of foster care.

You may also want to ask yourself the following questions:

- What is my motivation to foster?
- Do I meet all the qualifications to become a foster parent?
- Am I patient and flexible, and do I have a sense of humor?
- How does my partner, child, and/or extended family feel about fostering?
- Can I handle having my family's way of life examined?
- Can I make the time to complete the home study process and commit to the required training that may call for travel at times?
- Would I be willing to keep up with the latest training and look for resources when I'm stuck?
- Do I have the knowledge and skill to care for a child of a different race, ethnicity, or SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression) status than myself?
- Am I willing to work with birth families, including extended relatives?
- Do I have a solid support network or know how to connect with one?
- Will I be able to cope with the grief and loss when a child leaves my home?
- If a child in my care needs an adoptive home, would I be willing to consider adopting or helping them transition to a pre-adoptive home?

## MORE QUESTIONS?

If you have more questions, please call us at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center. We are here to help! You may also want to learn more about support groups in your area. You can find more information in the Resource Appendix below.

Please remember that the Wisconsin Family Connections Center staff is here for you during every step of your journey.

## RESOURCE APPENDIX

The Wisconsin Family Connections Center website, [wifamilyconnectionscenter.org](http://wifamilyconnectionscenter.org), has several resources that may be helpful to you through your journey. By exploring the website, you can find:

- The Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook
- Access to our FREE Resource Library
- Tip sheets, current and archived newsletters, resource lists
- A calendar of events, including informational meetings, training, conferences, and family fun events
- Recorded training and resources
- Helpful lists (e.g., Agency list for counties, tribal and private foster care licensing agencies, support groups)
- Other foster care and adoption-related resources

If you need assistance navigating the website or any other information or resources, please call us at 1-800-762-8063.



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