

## Respecting the Confidentiality of Children in Care and Their Families

Imagine standing in line at a grocery store and a stranger asks you a question about one of the children in your care. Before you answer, think about how you would feel if a friend told a stranger something personal about you or your family.

To maintain confidentiality, Wisconsin has laws to protect the private information of children and families involved in the child welfare system. These laws pertain to foster parents and specify what can and cannot be said, as well as what the consequences could be if confidentiality is broken.

Respecting confidentiality helps build relationships with the child and their family by respecting all family members and their personal stories.

### What are Some of the Key Points?

- Foster parents cannot provide information to people not authorized to receive it. If you have any questions about whether a person has the authority to receive the information or how to answer a particular question, refer the person to the child's case worker.
- Children in foster care cannot be photographed or interviewed by the media without written permission from their parents or legal guardians. (While kids in care are placed with foster families by a lawful court order, foster parents are not the legal guardians.)

- Foster parents cannot speak to the media about children placed in their homes.
- If there's no need to specify that a child is in the foster care system when introducing them, don't identify them as such. For example, if you're at a church or a social event and shaking hands with greeters, you can simply say, "Hi, I'm Chris Smith, and this is Ty, Rose, and Jay." But if you're meeting a doctor or dentist for the first time, it might be helpful to let them know that you might

not know the complete medical history of the children in your care because they're in foster care.

### What Can I Say?

There will be many occasions when someone asks you about children in care and the foster care system. Many people are curious about foster care, especially children.

Instead of talking about your situation, specifically, try sharing

something about why you became a foster parent. Or you can educate others about foster care by telling them an interesting fact about foster care in the United States, such as that 12 million people have grown up in foster families.

A good rule is to keep conversations about kids in foster care general and positive. Talk about activities the children in your home are involved in or some of the current issues with the child welfare system. If someone asks you



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something particularly uncomfortable, you can always simply walk away, change the subject, ignore the question, or tell the person that it's confidential and you can't answer those questions.

### **Here Are Some Other Guidelines You Might Find Helpful**

- Introduce the children in your home—but by first name only.
- Don't mention the child's birth parents' names or reasons why a child is in care. Most experienced families find a clever way to change the subject or focus on something else about the child. It's better to talk generally about why you are a foster parent or why kids come into care.
- Keep school information, medical files, treatment plans, and referral materials in a locked cabinet.
- Promote the child's self-esteem by talking about interests and strengths. You could say, "This is Rose, and she likes to play soccer and help me cook. She says she doesn't like school, but her teachers speak highly of her."
- If your county allows you to post pictures and stories of children in care on Facebook and other sites, do not identify them as children in foster care. It is also a good idea to check with the birth parents and the case worker before posting. If the child is old enough, ask their permission to post their photo, as well. It is an excellent way to give them some control and build trust.
- Gently redirect children if they start to disclose too much information.
- Teach birth, adoptive, and foster children in your home to also follow confidentiality guidelines. It's natural for siblings to "fight dirty" when they're mad, but stress that sharing anyone else's personal information is never okay.

Individual county agencies and foster care agencies often have written guidelines

regarding the use of social media. You may want to check with your agency to see if they have a policy you need to know.

Setting boundaries around who you talk to and what you discuss with others regarding the children you foster will help maintain confidentiality. It also helps to think about these situations before they arise.

### **How Does Confidentiality Impact You?**

You may not think that maintaining confidentiality will impact you one way or the other. However, it can significantly impact your license and your current placements. The following are some things that could happen to you—and have happened to other families in Wisconsin—after breaching confidentiality.

- The child may be removed from your care.
- Your family may have to comply with a corrective action plan to maintain your license.
- Your placing agency (your county or the private agency you are licensed by) may revoke your foster license, with the potential to not have one issued in the future.
- You open yourself and your agency up to a lawsuit.

While it's natural to want to share stories and experiences with friends and family, one of your responsibilities as a foster parent is not to divulge specific and identifying information about the children in your care and their families.

The good news is that once your relatives and community members get to know the kids for who they are, they'll stop asking about their past. Instead, you'll be sharing the stories that all parents share: the time they missed the bus and had to walk the three miles to school, the time he got the

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lead in the school play, and the vacations you took together.

In addition to the information you received about confidentiality throughout the licensing process, we also recommend the [Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook](#).

If you have any questions regarding confidentiality and foster care, please contact your social worker or call us at 1-800-762-8063.



## Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook for Children in Foster Care*, by the Center for Adoption Support and Education

Tip Sheet

- [Helping Kids in Care Change Schools](#)