

The Importance of Documentation

It can be puzzling to figure out how to provide the best care for children and youth in care. The birth family, therapist, judge, court-appointed special advocate, guardian ad litem, and the team of social workers each hold pieces to this puzzle.

You, too, have an essential piece of the puzzle. As you get to know the child in your care, your observations provide crucial information to the therapist, judge, and social workers as the permanency plan for care unfolds. The best outcome occurs when all concerned parties know a child's needs and work together to meet those needs.

Observing a child's behaviors and sharing that information is part of fostering. Keeping a written record of your observations helps create an accurate account of day-to-day pieces of information.



- Your caseworker can help you address issues and work with the child if you accurately describe their behaviors. Caseworkers can determine a child's needs best if they have a clear picture of what is happening in a placement.
- Documentation will allow the child to learn where they were and who cared for them even if they were too young or anxious to remember that time or if the placement was not long or had an unsatisfactory ending.
- One Wisconsin Foster Care Coordinator

suggests keeping a notebook or journal of the child's daily life. It doesn't have to be formal, and she does not necessarily want to see it. Jot down notes. She has seen families use these written records in court.

- Dates are important. Record specific activities,

like dental appointments, doctor's appointments, and school information. Home visits are essential to record. Keep records of crises and challenges with dates.

Why Record Information?

- Your account of a child's behavior and progress may be used in court and affect important decisions about placement and care.
- Your records may protect you if there are allegations of abuse and neglect.
- The child's therapist may use your information to form therapeutic plans.

- A Wisconsin foster parent e-mails her observations to the social worker, birth parents, therapist, and others on the team, which allows her to share the same information in one step.

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As you keep your notes, keep in mind that any information you document and share with legal parties or the case manager is added to the official file and could be shared with the child's birth parent(s).

Most importantly, keep confidentiality in mind. Use passwords on your computer and get a locked file cabinet for your notes.

The following are some suggestions about how to observe and record information. Keep these questions in mind:

1. **Where?** What is the setting in which the behavior occurs? Is it in front of the TV, in the car, or at meals?
2. **What time of day?** Does the behavior occur before or is anticipated after certain activities take place? Does it happen when home visits are coming up or following home visits?
3. **How often?** What is the frequency of behavior? Is it several times an hour or a day? Count and record the number of times it happens.
4. **How long** does the behavior last, over hours or days? How many days in a row does it occur? What is the **duration** of the behavior? The frequency and duration of a behavior help determine if there is a pattern to it.
5. **What have you done?** Have you tried to stop disruptive or harmful behavior or reinforce positive behavior? What have you tried to do to either intervene or encourage what the child is doing? Did it help?
6. **What is the impact of the behavior?** How does it affect the child or others? How do others react to the behavior and the child when the behavior occurs?

How you feel is important, but what the child does is the first critical piece to bring to therapists, the court, and the team.

Let's look at two examples.

A caregiver can describe Joel's behavior in two ways. You might say:

Breakfast is awful because of Joel. He is surly and just plain cranky in the morning. I get so frustrated because we are late for school and work. He makes us late all the time.

Or you could describe what happens:

Joel gets up on time, dresses, and gets ready for school. But he has yet to eat breakfast since he came. He stands by the wall and raps under his breath. He does not talk or look at anyone. Three days this week, he spent 15 minutes in the bathroom before school. We have been late for school and work for three days. I sent him to school with a granola bar each morning. It's hard on all of us.

Here is another example of describing Kendra's behavior in two ways. You might say:

Kendra is perfect. She is so cute and fun to have. Great student, too. Takes perfect care of herself. I just love having her here. She has a great personality but seems a little nervous.

Or you could describe what happens:

Kendra helps around the house, keeps her room clean, does her homework, and earns A's and B's. She takes a shower every day and does her hair and makeup appropriately. She answers when we talk to her and tells us she likes it here and that we are nice. She asks for nothing. Kendra calls us "Mom and Dad" and has done so from the beginning. We do hear her awake and moving around her room at night. She hides her bitten fingernails under the table or behind her. She rocks herself and hums when

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she thinks she is alone.

Describe the child's behavior, then your reactions or opinions. Most of us would guess that Joel does not want to go to school, and Kendra wants to stay at this home. But both guesses might be wrong. By recording and sharing the child's actions, you give the team information to work with.

Let's consider Tanya, an 11-year-old girl who saves food in her room. You allow the children in your home to take food or drinks to their room for snacking. But you found a store of it on Tanya's closet shelf.

Here are things you can note and share with the team:

- Did she eat the right amount of food for a child her size?
- When does she take this food?
- How often does she take food?
- What does she actually have on her shelf?
- Does she eat it?
- Does she take it regularly, or does she only do this at certain times?
- Is she secretive about it, or does she share her food and knowledge of her stash with other family members, friends, or you?

At a team meeting, you also might want to ask what information other team members would like you to document. Sometimes, you might be recording too much information, causing stress for you and the other teammates. You and your family, after all, have a right to be just that—a family.

You acquire important information about all children who come into your home. You see their behaviors daily. When all the pieces fit together to depict a child's needs accurately, the child's healing is much more likely.

Sharing your observations with the birth family and listening to what the birth family can share in return also helps build a united

front so that kids see a team of people who are there to help them. These observations help to make the picture—and the relationships therein—whole.



Resources

Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook](#)
- [Behavior Tracking Sheet](#)
- *Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Assessment of Children and Adolescents*, by Sara A. Whitcomb