

The Benefits of Stability: Creating Safety & Trust

People decide to become foster parents for a variety of reasons. Some may choose to foster when they enter the “empty nest” period—their kids have grown up, and they want to continue nurturing and caring for children. Others may have a roomy house, a flexible schedule, and a drive to help families in need. Some foster parents spent time in foster care when they were young and want to support youth in a similar situation.

The goal of foster care is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children while their parents work toward reunification. Unfortunately, some children in out-of-home care may experience multiple moves between caregivers. These transitions can be difficult for everyone involved, especially the children.

According to the Casey Family Programs, 59% of children in care for two years or longer have lived in three or more homes. Research shows that a child loses a year of social, emotional, and educational development with every unplanned move. When these moves happen, everyone involved is hurt—the child, the child’s birth family, the foster family, and the agency.

The Impact of Instability

Each move a child makes can have a significant negative impact. Evidence shows that the inability to form secure attachments

to caregivers can impact a child’s developing brain. Even a single move or separation from a caregiver can be problematic for an infant, child, or teen—primarily if it occurs during critical developmental periods. Examples of negative outcomes are listed below:

- Multiple moves may make the child feel they are “bad,” unlovable, or unwanted. This may confirm their suspicions that they are in care because it is their fault. Lack of trust may hinder the child’s ability to establish and maintain relationships moving forward.
- This instability can impact children academically and socially. When they move, they may need to change neighborhoods and schools and lose academic potential and friendships.
 - Leaving a foster home unexpectedly can exacerbate trauma behaviors and existing mental health issues.
 - Lack of stability may delay permanency by making it more difficult to find a welcoming home because others are reluctant to care for a child in multiple homes.



When family dynamics become challenging, what are some things caregivers can do to move toward stability instead of moving away from it? There is often a point when caregivers have to reconcile the difference between their initial expectations of being a foster family and their current reality.

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When a child is first welcomed into the home, there will sometimes be a “honeymoon period” when a child is on their best behavior. This may be the case because the child wants to impress you, wants to follow the rules, and wants you to like them. Alternatively, they may be quiet and complacent because they are going through a period of grieving and the accompanying feelings of shock, fear, and loss of the familiar. While everyone is getting to know each other, foster families may feel things are working out better than expected. They feel good about themselves and about how they are making a difference in the world.

Then things may start to change. These changes may occur slowly or may appear to happen overnight. The child or youth may become defiant, refuse to follow the rules or scream angrily at you. They may not come home when expected or make false allegations of abuse. This is the point when everyone in the home begins to feel a move toward instability.

At this point, it is crucial to make decisions about how to improve the situation. Now is the time to start questioning why the child is acting like this. Are they testing whether you are going to like the “real” them? Are they grieving deeply and don’t know how to express their feelings? As you try to find answers, don’t lose hope. These challenges will lessen over time, just as in any family, as you continue to build closer bonds and feelings of safety and trust.

Moving Toward Stability

Foster families and professionals need to make every effort to minimize the number of homes and families that a child is asked to connect with during foster care. To prevent putting the burden of stability on the child, it is essential to recognize when challenges are pushing you, as the caregiver, to begin thinking about what it could be like if the child left your home.

Here are some signs of instability to watch out for:

- Are concerns about behaviors or negative experiences being raised, yet solutions have not been offered or are not working?
- Has the child made an allegation or other informal complaints?
- Has the child or youth been missing or absent from the home on a regular basis?
- Have you started to “go public” with your diminishing pleasure in being a foster parent? For example, do you find yourself sharing negative experiences in the community or on social media?

Although it can be hard to admit, it’s common to have feelings of resentment toward the child you have chosen to welcome into your home. You may feel exhausted and unable to manage their emotions in addition to yours. You may feel you are in over your head and not skilled enough to provide what this child needs. You may worry that your other children will also pick up on these behaviors and start acting out. You may realize that being a foster parent is not what you expected it to be. So now what?

The first step in working through the resentment is to acknowledge what your expectations were going into the process of becoming a foster parent. What was the relationship you were hoping for? How did you envision the family dynamic? What can you do now to move towards that ideal or to readjust your initial expectations?

You may identify areas that could benefit from additional training, coaching, support groups, or therapy. Understand that parenting children who have experienced trauma takes more than just love. Be willing to ask for help. Be patient and give the child time to adjust. This patience and understanding can be a crucial component in helping children heal.

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Here are some actions steps you can take during challenging times:

- **It takes a village:** You most likely had conversations with many friends and family members when thinking about being a foster family. And they most likely offered to help when you needed it. Now is the time to take them up on that offer! Perhaps they could help with meal preparation or school commutes. Let them share their parenting advice. Spend time with people you are close to in order to relieve stress. It's okay to vent and it's okay to ask for help.
- **Know your triggers:** If you've experienced things like parental substance use, domestic violence, assault, neglect, abandonment, or rejection, painful memories may rise to the surface over the course of fostering. Take the time to identify your feelings. Consider going to therapy to give some time and attention to yourself.
- **Keep the lines of communication open:** Talk with your Foster Care Coordinator and rely on them as a sounding board when you feel unsure or frustrated. Let them know when you start to feel overwhelmed. The sooner you seek support, the sooner a solution may arise.
- **Take advantage of respite services:** Respite care is short-term care for children and youth in foster care. Respite homes are generally available on weekends and provide breaks for fostering families. In a non-fostering family, parents may have good luck taking their children to visit their grandparents' house, or they might spend some time with their aunts, uncles, and cousins on the weekends. Respite homes can provide you with the same kind of break you need to recharge your batteries.
- **Seek out a support network:** A fellow foster parent will understand you. They know the struggles you are facing firsthand. Ask your Foster Care

Coordinator if they have a peer mentor you could connect with. Or join a support group. When you have found your people, call them, text them, or grab a coffee together. It's hard to do this alone. Expand your community of supportive individuals.

Building Secure Attachments

Children in out-of-home care need adult connections who support their well-being. These secure attachments are created in stable relationships that help children and youth maintain connection with their family and community. Too often, instability and moves are blamed on youth and behavioral challenges. We encourage you to enter this commitment to care with realistic expectations, an awareness of trauma behaviors, a pledge to hang in there with the child, and a willingness to educate yourself. Kids deserve a safe, compassionate, stable, prepared, patient, healing environment. They deserve nurturing care from adults who are willing and able to meet their needs.



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Raising Kids with Big, Baffling Behaviors*, by Robyn Gobbel
- *Behavior with a Purpose*, by Richard Delaney, PhD & Charley Joyce, LICSW

Tip Sheet

- [Tips to Manage Crisis Behavior](#)

Additional Resources

- [What impacts placement stability?](#)
- [Changes in Placement among Children in Foster Care: A Longitudinal Study of Child and Case Influences](#)