

Foster Care Firsts: What Your Journey May Include

Being a first-time foster parent can be exciting. You have learned a lot and are working on building your circles of support. While you wait in great anticipation to welcome that first child to your home, you're probably wondering what to expect and how to prepare best.

In this tip sheet, we wanted to share some situations you may experience during your fostering journey. Every family is unique, and every child brings individual needs, joys, and challenges. There may be moments that are emotional, frustrating, and challenging, and there will be moments that are filled with joy and fulfillment. Here is a brief overview of what you could experience as a foster parent.



- A child may arrive at your care with only a few hour's notice and perhaps without much information.
- You might feel that you have little control and that big decisions are made about the child in your care, perhaps without your input.
- There may be times when you disagree with decisions that have been made about the child's care.
- You might struggle to understand how or why a child in your care can want so strongly to return home to their parents—no matter what.
- There may be times when a child you have been caring for is going to be

reunified with their birth parents, and you are worried that those birth parents may not be ready.

- You may have times when you need to change family plans to accommodate the child's needs.
- It can be difficult to learn about how children in your care were maltreated or hear about situations that were painful and traumatic.
- It is often challenging to juggle the many commitments involved in the child's care.
- The child you are caring for may have trauma behaviors that are difficult and which may make you feel angry, nauseous, triggered, or many other feelings.

Knowing what to do with the many firsts can be daunting! Sometimes, you wonder if what you're experiencing is "normal" or even typical if it happens often. You may think, "Is our family the only family going through this?" Maybe the situation makes you angry, embarrassed, or questioning your parenting skills. These are all natural emotions, and it's important to know your feelings about your fostering firsts, whether joyful or uncomfortable, are valid. Following are some tips that may be helpful for you and your family:

- Connect with other foster parents. Sharing your experiences and hearing from other foster families will go a long

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way toward helping you feel supported, understood, and “normal.”

- Seek support from your agency, including increased contact with your worker and licenser, respite, or connections to services or resources for the child in your care and your own family.
- Engage in learning opportunities, such as online or face-to-face training, reading resource materials, and asking questions of more experienced foster parents.
- Keep an open mind around shared parenting. Birth parents can teach us much about the children in our care, as well as empathy and patience.
- Learn from the children you’re caring for. Staying present, being in the moment, practicing acceptance, and delighting in the magic that is a child is all part of the journey.
- Accept each first as a learning opportunity and as one of many future opportunities to be there for a child who needs a family to help them heal.
- Make time for self-care. Taking care of children can be challenging—especially when they have experienced trauma. To be the best parent you can be, you must be sure you take time to rest, recharge, and regroup.

While there are certainly challenges that you will face in your fostering journey, we want you to know that there are also joys! Some of the following experiences may not happen when you care for your first child; in fact, it may take a while. Yet, your continued commitment to caring for children touched by out-of-home care—whether for a short time or a lifetime—makes a difference in many ways, big and small. Here are some of the many positive experiences you may encounter:

- The feeling you will have when a child in your care shows signs of trust and healing.
- Hearing a birth parent thank you for

caring for their child.

- Seeing your own children exhibit compassion and empathy for the children you’re fostering.
- Falling in love with a child, even though you know reunification is the plan. (Yes, that can be challenging and positive all at the same time.)
- Witnessing a birth parent making progress on becoming a safer parent.
- Playing a part in helping a teen experience one of many “teen firsts,” such as driving, going to the prom, or excelling at a sport while being parented in your home.
- Hearing from a young adult who spent time in your care and having them say that being in your home greatly impacted their life.
- The feeling of fulfillment and having made a difference in a child's life.

Being there for a child and the child’s family is one of the most significant and caring things you can do for your community, your region, and your world. As you encounter each “first” in your fostering journey, the Wisconsin Family Connections Center listens, provides support, and offers quality resources and learning opportunities.



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Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Caring for Children Under Five](#)
- [Fostering Older Youth](#)
- [Foster Care, Grief & Loss](#)
- [Preparing the Kids in Your Home for Fostering](#)
- [Caring for a Child or Youth With Special Healthcare Needs](#)
- [Foster Parents and Social Workers: Allies and Advocates for Youth in Care](#)
- [Supporting the Social-Emotional Learning and Development of Children in Your Care](#)

Additional Resources

- [11+ Tips for First Time Foster Parents](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *The Foster Parenting Manual*, by John DeGarmo
- *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered*, by Dr. Bruce D. Perry

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Working in Partnership With Birth Parents](#)
- [Let's Talk: Preparing Your Home to Welcome a Child](#)
- [Let's Talk: Partnering With Birth Parents](#)
- [Raising Resilient Children](#)

Inspiration & Hope from [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Fostering the Family](#)
- [Take Time to Recharge](#)