

Helping Teens in Care Transition to Adulthood

The potential for teens in foster care is limitless. Many former youth in care have accomplished amazing things and achieved great success as valued members of their community. Their accomplishments reflect their resilience and the positive impact of caring adults like you, who play a vital role in guiding them along the way in their lives.

The teenage years are essential for developing independent living skills and gaining experience that will be the foundation for self-sufficient living as an adult. These years can be tricky, and they are often filled with opportunities for growth and exploration. Many teens in care have already demonstrated incredible survival skills, frequently stepping up to care for themselves and perhaps their siblings. However, as they prepare for adulthood, it's just as vital for them to enjoy the experiences of being a typical teenager without the constant weight of adult responsibilities.

As a foster parent, you have a unique chance to support them in enjoying special moments and milestones such as prom and graduation and exploring educational or career opportunities. While preparing youth for independence is important, it should not overshadow the importance of allowing them to savor their adolescence. Their transition into adulthood must include not only the

practical aspects of life—like understanding government assistance—but also the excitement and milestones that make this stage of life so memorable.

Teaching Teens Life Skills

Reflect back on when you were getting ready to launch into adulthood. Was it an easy transition, or did you experience some “bumps in the road” or life lessons along your journey? Did you have a family support

network and access to the necessary resources to guide you along your journey?

Most 18-year-olds are still largely dependent upon their parents or family support system to provide support, assistance, and guidance before, during, and after transitioning into adulthood. As foster

parents, you have the opportunity to help guide and prepare teenagers in your care for this new and uncharted journey.

Youth in care may receive independent living skills from the Independent Living Skills Program (ILP), but you can further reinforce the skills they are learning in ILP in your home. For example, have you heard questions like these from any current or former youth in your care?

“Why did all my t-shirts turn pink after I washed them?”



Continued on page 2

“I didn’t realize that putting a metal bowl in the microwave would cause so much damage.”

“I lost my job and don’t know how to file for unemployment. Can you please help me?”

Laundry, cooking, and job skills are just a few of the key areas where teens may need your help as they step into adulthood. Here are a few more:

- Job search strategies
- How to apply for a job
- Preparing for a job interview
- Creating a resume
- Keeping a job
- Managing money (such as opening a checking or savings account and understanding how credit works)
- Paying bills on time and budgeting
- How to find safe and affordable housing
- What a rental lease agreement entails
- Explaining a security deposit
- Locating reliable and safe transportation options
- How to access physical and mental health care resources
- Cooking and nutritional skills
- Cleaning skills such as laundry and day-to-day house cleaning skills

Building Connections to Life Skill Resources

Connecting teens with local and statewide resources can significantly benefit their transition. Community resources are available to youth leaving foster care, including food stamps, Medicaid (which teens aging out of care continue to remain eligible to receive), local food pantries, post-secondary educational resources, transitions to long-term care, and local housing resources. As a helpful reminder, teens with an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) are eligible to continue living in their foster homes after graduating from high school and until age 21. The Wisconsin Department of

Children and Families has [a comprehensive list of resources](#) that may help you and the youth in your care.

Practical Tips for Increasing Independent Living Skills

Many former foster youth face challenges as they age out of care. Foster parents can help teens reach their full potential and avoid adverse outcomes. Here are some practical strategies to consider:

- ***Start early***
Helping teens build independent living skills should start as early as possible. Even if a youth in care exits the system through reunification with their birth family or through adoption, the time they spend with their foster family(ies) is critical to their development. Actively looking for ways to build independent living skills from the day a child joins their family will help foster parents ensure the youth have the foundation to build on as they move through their teen years into adulthood.
 - ***Offer opportunities to make decisions***
Policy changes such as Reasonable and Prudent Parenting have made it easier for foster families to support decision-making with the teens in their care. These policy changes also make it easier for teens to engage in “normal teen activities.” Being transported by neighbors or friends (not just the foster family, as in the past) and engaging in social activities, such as sleepovers and school social events, are just a few examples.
- Foster parents have a unique opportunity to help build decision-making skills by giving teens choices whenever possible and allowing the youth to learn from the consequences—good or bad—of their choices. A small example might include giving the teen a choice as to what time

Continued on page 3

they are expected to go to bed while helping them understand that they must wake up at a particular time the following day for school. Another example might be allowing the teen to have flexibility in how they spend their free time after school while helping them understand that they also have to take care of any chores and finish their homework. As teens age, try to increase the complexity of choices and flexibility while maintaining safe and appropriate boundaries. By involving the teens and young adults in your care in decision-making opportunities, you are equipping them to make healthy and appropriate choices in the future—even if there is no one there to guide them.

- ***Increase expectations and responsibilities***

It is often said that children rise to meet expectations, and far too frequently, teens in foster care hear more about their limitations than their potential. However, foster parents can help increase a teen's confidence by raising expectations and increasing responsibilities. An example might be to give the teen the responsibility of planning a family meal one night a week. Next, they can go with you to the grocery store to pick out ingredients and help prepare the meal until they can complete the process independently.

Another example might be helping a teen establish a budget for things they might want, such as going out with friends or a new app for their phone. You can help the youth complete the steps needed to earn the funds for the budget, whether by completing extra chores for an increased allowance or getting a work permit and part-time job. Foster parents might also help youth in their care set goals for academic achievement, behavior, and conduct in the community. Over time, use consistency and gentle reminders to help

encourage them to meet—and exceed—their goals. With proper guidance, teens can achieve goals, exceed expectations, and build a sense of personal empowerment that will allow them to face future challenges.

- ***Look for everyday teachable moments***

We take many tasks in our day-to-day adult lives for granted, but they are, nonetheless, essential. We typically learn these skills from our parents or through experience. From doing laundry to balancing a checkbook, navigating public transportation, or maintaining a home, some teens exit foster care with very little practical experience with these essential skills. As a result, they may struggle to navigate the daily realities of being a responsible adult. Foster parents can look for ways to include teens in these daily tasks to build these independent living skills. For example, the youth could be included in reviewing the various monthly household bills and shown how to create and manage a budget. Other examples can include taking them on a city or town tour using public transportation, inviting them to your local bank to talk with an account manager about the various types of banking accounts, and making sure they participate in chores and home maintenance projects.

- ***Celebrate successes, learn from shortcomings***

Although teens often don't show it, they crave approval and recognition from adults. It's important for foster parents, as role models, to look for opportunities to celebrate successes—both big and small—with the youth in their care. Even if those accomplishments start small, it's important to show children and youth that there are adults who care about their achievements and are invested in them doing well. Foster parents should look for

Continued on page 4

ways to celebrate successes that are meaningful to the teen. This can include going out to their favorite restaurant or participating in an activity together, like going to the movies, playing sports, or working on a craft.

On the other hand, it is also important for foster parents to acknowledge when a youth in their care falls short of expectations. When this happens, responding with compassion and guidance is helpful in teaching teens coping skills and resiliency. Finding time to talk daily about experiences, successes, and challenges can also be beneficial.

The Importance of Co-Parenting

When reunification with the birth family is a permanency goal, co-parenting with the birth parents is an essential component to successfully parenting a teen in foster care. Whenever possible, try to seek feedback from birth parents on the strategies being used in the foster home and at the birth parent's home to parent the teen and teach the essential skills of successful daily living. Sharing the teen's challenges and successes with the birth parents will help them stay connected with their child and may even shed some light on factors and family conditions that could be influencing the teen's behavior.

This kind of communication can also be a means of modeling effective parenting practices for birth parents that will help grow their parenting skills, reduce the likelihood of the teen re-entering out-of-home care, and minimize some of the anxiety foster parents feel when a child leaves their home. Additionally, when teens can see a healthy partnership between their birth parents and foster parents, it can have a profound impact on their sense of well-being and security.

Foster Parents Are the Key

Preparing teens to leave the foster system is no small task. However, witnessing a teen learn, grow, and take those first successful steps into adulthood is very rewarding. Foster parents, you are essential to their success!



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, by David Walsh
- *Life After Foster Care—100 Things I've Learned*, by Georgette Todd

Tip Sheets

- [Fostering Older Youth](#)
- [Being an Ally for LGBTQ Youth+](#)

Additional WiFCC Resource

- [Resources for Youth in Care](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [We Are Go for Launch: How To Get There](#)

Additional Resources

- [Youth in Transition: Transitions to Adult Long-term Care](#)
- [Youth Services Paying for College](#)
- [Teen and Young Adult Resources](#)
- [Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood: Guidance for Foster Parent](#)
- [15 Things to Help a Foster Youth Transition into Adulthood](#)
- [5 Things to Know about the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood](#)