



You Don't Have to Foster to Make a Difference:

Ways to Support Children in Care

Children and youth in the foster care system are often some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Many people want to help but are unsure how to reach out and make a difference in a child's life.

At any given time, Wisconsin has an estimated 7,000 children in foster care. Many of these children will be reunified with their birth families. Others may "age out" of the foster care system or find permanency through guardianship or adoption with relatives or other caregivers. Children in our foster care system are generally school-age and can have needs that range from needing a safe home to specialized therapy to needing a trusted adult.

Many of us genuinely want to help, but fostering or adopting is not a good fit at this time in our lives. Several other ways to help children in the foster care system include mentoring, recruiting other parents, providing respite, volunteering, or donating.

Mentoring

You can look into the process of becoming a mentor for a child who needs an adult role model. Mentors fulfill many roles, including friend, tutor, supervisor, and guide. A mentor supports a child (or another parent or caregiver) in their journey.

You can learn more about possible mentorship opportunities directly through your local county, tribal, or private child placement agencies or within your community through churches, schools, or programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters (more on this later).

If you are a local business owner looking to support children and youth in care, you could consider offering an apprenticeship with your business for youth or creating a job opportunity for a birth parent or youth seeking employment.

"I really wanted to be a foster parent," says Dane County mentor Meg Stevens. "But my husband wasn't up for the idea. So I became a mentor instead."

She says, "I have been so impressed by the foster parents who welcome children into their homes and give them a fighting chance. They often need a mentor's support just as much as the kids do."



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2020; 2024; 2026



Help By Recruiting Others

Even if you don't become a foster or adoptive parent, you could help recruit others interested in learning more about the process or who share a desire to help children and youth in care in other ways.

You could refer friends, neighbors, or relatives to contact us at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center. A member of our Resource Team will speak with them to share more about the foster care or adoption process, or other ways they can provide support. Contact us at 1-800-762-8063 or info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org.

You could also print and display informational brochures or posters within your community or business, or host an informative event. Some people have invited foster parents, adoptive parents, relative caregivers, birth parents, and other professionals to do a panel or speak at their churches or at other events or groups where they can invite guests to share information and resources.

Respite Provider

Respite providers are in constant need in Wisconsin. A respite provider holds a foster care license for the short-term care of a child in foster care. This may mean a weekend break for foster parents or a longer time, sometimes a week or two.

Respite is a beautiful way to create connections and support foster families and children. Contact your [local county, tribal, or child placement agency](#) for information on becoming a respite provider. Other organizations provide respite care; many are listed with the [Respite Care Association of Wisconsin](#).

Community Volunteerism

The opportunities to volunteer and make a positive difference in the lives of youth in care are endless. For example, schools need volunteers to help with mentoring, after-school tutoring, or coaching. There are many opportunities to volunteer at community centers, such as:

- [YMCA](#)
- [Boys and Girls Clubs](#)
- [Girl Scouts](#) or [Boy Scouts](#)
- [Big Brothers/Big Sisters](#)
- After-school programs
- Community Centers
- Daycare Centers
- Hospitals or Clinics
- Community Service Programs
- Foster Closets Programs

[The United Way](#) supports many agencies that affect foster care. Perhaps your skills and knowledge could be helpful in community service groups like the Elks Club, Rotary, Knights of Columbus, or Lions and Lioness Clubs.

Volunteer Drivers

Some Wisconsin counties have a Volunteer Driver program, where you can sign up to transport children to appointments. Sometimes, the best conversations you have with kids happen when you're driving to and from destinations. Volunteer driver programs are a vital support for youth and families. Some volunteer driver programs reimburse you for mileage for some appointments. Check with your local human services agency for additional details.

Donations

Another meaningful way to assist children in care is through donations. Many children enter care with little to no personal belongings. Child welfare and human service agencies are often happy to accept donations such as:

- Clothing
- Blankets
- Baby supplies
- Personal care items
- Books and toys for all ages
- Cameras
- Art supplies
- Backpacks
- Photo albums
- Bikes
- Gift cards
- Suitcases
- Musical instruments
- Scrapbooking supplies
- Computers

Contact your local human services agency to find out what they might need before you donate.

You could also research local foster and adoption support groups or associations, foster closets and like agencies, non-profit organizations supporting this target population, etc., and consider monetary donations, sponsorships, gift cards, or other items. Perhaps through these agencies or in your research, you may uncover programming and opportunities where you could sponsor a foster child for extra-curricular activities, summer camps, or sports teams.

Many businesses support foster and adoptive families by offering discounts on products, services, or events. You can, too, if you are a business owner.

There are many ways to help children—maybe you have unique ideas to help kids in your area. Your one act (or several acts!) of kindness may change children's lives and give them hope they may not have had before. Reaching out and supporting youth in care will make a lasting impact.

Contact your [local county, tribal, or child placement agency](#) or connect with a member of our Resource Team today at 1-800-762-8063 or info@wifamilyconnections.org to get started.

Resources

Additional Resources

- [Foster Closets in Wisconsin](#)
- [Ten Ways to Support Foster Care \(Without Fostering\)](#)
- [Ways to Help](#)