



Supporting Teens Leaving Care: Resources and Guidance for Foster Parents

For young people who have experienced foster care, turning 18 is not simply a milestone—it can feel like stepping into the world without a safety net. Many have navigated instability with caregivers, disruptions in school and community connections, and, in some cases, involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system. As they approach adulthood, feelings of abandonment or rejection may resurface. While their peers may rely on family for financial help, advice, or a place to land if plans fall through, youth leaving care often feel intense pressure to “make it” on their own immediately. This pressure can be both motivating and overwhelming.

The emotional impact of this transition cannot be understated. Some young adults develop a strong sense of hyper-independence—believing they must rely only on themselves and hesitating to trust others or ask for help. Others may struggle with anxiety about housing, finances, or simply whether they will have someone to call in a moment of crisis. Beneath the practical tasks of securing employment, housing, and education lies a deeper need: stability, belonging, and the reassurance that they are not alone. Understanding this emotional landscape helps foster parents approach transition planning not only as skill-building, but as relationship-building—grounded in consistency, encouragement, and connection.

Several challenges can present themselves for young people in foster care who are approaching this milestone achievement of living independently. You can help tweens and teens in your care prepare for this transition by starting as early as possible—especially if the permanency plan identifies a goal of transitioning the youth from foster care to living independently or with others.

As a helpful reminder, teens with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) are eligible to remain in their foster homes after high school graduation 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: [Teen and Young Adult Portal](#).

The Critical & Ongoing Roles of Foster Parents

The transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency can be an incredibly challenging journey for any young person. For teenagers who have been in foster care, the upcoming transition to adulthood is often an intimidating and, at times, overwhelming experience.

There are a multitude of responsibilities that these young adults will need to familiarize themselves with, manage, and navigate:

Housing Resources

- Locating safe and affordable housing options



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- Understanding what a rental agreement or lease is and the consequences that will occur if they do not fulfill these contracts
- Investing enough money for a security deposit and the first month's rent

Financial

- Earning enough money to cover daily living expenses
- Learning how to manage and maintain a budget
- Setting up a checking and savings account
- Understanding repayment of loans and how credit works
- Applying for postsecondary financial aid options
- Obtaining health, auto, and rental insurance coverage
- Establishing a savings plan for planned and unexpected expenses

Employment

- Knowing where to seek out job opportunities
- Developing resume skills
- Establishing interviewing skills
- Being responsible at work (being on time, respecting authority, etc.)

Transportation

- Developing a transportation plan (public transportation vs. owning a car; walking vs. riding a bike)
- Insurance needs and bank loans if choosing a car for transportation to work and/or school

Education

- Applying to and visiting post-secondary education technical colleges and colleges
- Navigating the financial aid process
- Learning to balance work, school, and personal life
- Accessing educational and other support services at their school of choice if they have an IEP or a 504 Plan
- Connecting with campus contacts who help youth formerly in foster care navigate admission, financial aid, and student and academic services before and once on campus. Campus contacts are listed below for each technical college, University of Wisconsin System school, and private college or university (Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities).
 - [Wisconsin Technical College](#) campus contacts
 - [UW System](#) campus contacts
 - [Wisconsin Private Colleges](#) campus contacts

Wellness

- Maintaining a healthy and balanced diet
- Focusing on physical fitness and wellness
- Focusing on mental health and mindfulness
- Locating and accessing community resources and support services

These are just a few examples of the responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities young people look forward to. The good news is that support systems and resources are available to help them succeed. As one young person formerly in foster care shared, “When you are a young adult leaving care, you find you are often ill-prepared for adult life and do not have the networks to support you if an emergency occurs. For most young people, 18-24 are years when they take risks and figure out which career path they want to follow. Being a support for youth can allow them to transition into adulthood and give them a chance to explore opportunities, develop financial independence, and create healthy, lifelong relationships.”

This is where you have an opportunity to prepare and support the youth in your care. Talk with them about their thoughts, plans, and hopes for their future. Provide them with opportunities to learn and practice new skills. Empower youth to build positive connections with others and cultivate new connections and community support networks.

All of us rely on the guidance and advice from our circles of support. We look to those people to lift us when we are feeling down and to offer suggestions when we are unsure of what to do. At a time when most young adults are still relying on family for financial and emotional support, youth who are transitioning from care are often fully on their own.

But they do not have to be. You can provide integral support and ongoing connections for these young adults as they take their next steps in life. You might:

- Continue to be a mentor
- Offer guidance, support, and advice
- Be an advocate
- Provide compassionate and empathetic listening
- Be a scout for local, state, and online resources
- Celebrate successful choices and use the not-so-successful outcomes as learning and growth experiences.

The following are some further ideas for supporting the youth in your care:

Daily living & life skills. Young people often learn best through first-hand experiences. Incorporating everyday “teachable moments” provides valuable lessons. For example, sharing how you manage paying bills, investing for future needs, thoroughly and accurately completing a job application, properly loading the washer, and teaching cooking skills are a few life skills you can teach the youth in your care.

A personalized transition plan. The sooner the discussion about the topic of transition planning is initiated, the more opportunities will become available for you and the youth in your care to explore some interactive experiences. Asking open-ended questions about their goals and dreams will provide wonderful insights and encourage open dialogues with one another.

The same holds for the more practical goals. For example, going to a bank or credit union to open a checking and/or savings account is a life skill they will need to learn. Searching together for housing options, such as apartments, might be enlightening for the young person in your care and provide an opportunity to discuss where they would like to live, the practicalities of rent, and the rules and realities that come with renting or leasing a place of their own.

Building positive community connections. One of the most important building blocks of resilience for a young person is a connection to a supportive, caring adult. Connectedness and a sense of belonging are important gifts we can give young people, and they keep on giving.

As young adults move forward, it is essential that they develop and maintain supportive relationships that empower them to achieve their goals. Having open, honest discussions about their goals, hopes, and dreams can provide you with insights to guide them to other supportive people. Perhaps that means a connection you have with someone in your faith-based community, school, work, or service club. Facilitating those connections for the youth in your care can help build a safe, supportive network.

A permanency pact. A permanency pact is a pledge from a supportive adult to provide specific support to a young person in foster care, establishing a lifelong, kin-like relationship. FosterClub, a national network for young people in foster care, created [this example](#). You might use something similar with the youth in your care and encourage them to create similar agreements with other caring adults in their lives.

Post-secondary educational options & resources. There is a wide range of postsecondary options available to young people, from school types (public, private, nonprofit, and for-profit) to program types (targeted certificate programs, apprenticeships, two-year Associate degree programs, four-year-plus programs, and more).

The Foster Care Transition [Toolkit](#), created by the United States Department of Education, has a wealth of information on how to apply to a school or program, information about standardized testing, and financial aid options, all the way to suggestions on how young people can prepare themselves for the rigors associated with ongoing education. This toolkit is also intended as a resource for caring and supportive adults.

There is no doubt that transitioning to adulthood can be a challenging experience for any young person to undertake. All you do to help educate, support, and empower the youth in your care makes an incredible difference. If you need further information, resources, or support, please get in touch with our team of Resource Specialists.

Resources

Tip Sheet

- [Helping Teens in Care Transition to Adulthood](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Scholarship Information](#)
- *Transition Health Care Checklist: Preparing for Life as an Adult*, by the Wisconsin Community of Practice on Transition Practice Group on Health
- *The Black Foster Youth Handbook: 50+ Lessons I Learned to Successfully Age-Out of Foster Care & Holistically Heal*, by Ángela Quijada-Banks
- *Life After Foster Care - 100 Things I've Learned*, by Georgette Todd

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Building Stronger Relationships with Teens](#)

Additional Resources

- [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Scholarship Contact Persons](#)
- [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families: Youth Services Paying for College](#)
- [Wisconsin Youth Services | Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#)
- [Wisconsin Independent Living](#)
- [Handbook for Youth in Foster Care](#)
- [Post-secondary educational resource created by the Statewide Youth Advisory Council: Opening the Doors to College](#)
- [About Financial Aid - UW HELP](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway: Helping Youth Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [FosterClub: Helping Youth for the Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [Annie E. Casey Foundation Youth Opportunities Initiative](#)
- [Youth.Gov](#)
- [Youth Communications](#)
- [Independent Living \(IL\) Coordinators](#)
- [Transition Resource Agencies](#)
- [Wisconsin Fostering Success](#)