



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. 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.

Some of the following positive experiences may not happen when you care for your first child — in fact, it may take a while. But they are real, and they are worth it:

- 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.

"I was so scared and felt so alone when I started fostering. The Coalition and the Wisconsin Family Connections Center made me feel like I had a support system and gave me confidence." — Foster Parent

"When I started hearing that the way I was feeling wasn't just me, that it was normal, I just thought, 'these are my people!'" — Kinship Caregiver

There may also be moments that are emotional, frustrating, and challenging. Here is a brief overview of some situations you may encounter:

- A child may arrive at your care with only a few hours' notice and perhaps without much information.



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- 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 whether what you're experiencing is "normal" or even typical, especially if it happens often. You may think, "Is our family the only family going through this?" Maybe the situation makes you angry, embarrassed, or question your parenting skills. These are all natural emotions, and it's important to know that 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 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 of a child are 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.

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.

Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Caring for Children Under Five](#)
- [Fostering Older Youth](#)
- [Foster Care, Grief & Loss](#)
- [Preparing the Kids in Your Home for Fostering](#)
- [Fostering Children and Youth with Special Health Care 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](#)
- [Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First](#)
- *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered*, by Dr. Bruce D. Perry
- [Foster Care Information Packet](#)

Learn in the Champion Classrooms

- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Working in Partnership with Birth Parents](#)
- [Preparing Your Home for a Child](#)
- [Foster Parents Partnering with Birth Parents](#)
- [Raising Resilient Children](#)
- [Building Strong Relationships with Felt Safety \(Recorded Webinar\)](#)
- [Hope, Healing, and Connection: A Trauma-Responsive Journey for Families \(Recorded Webinar\)](#)
- [Beyond Hair Care: Celebrating the Power and Cultural Significance of Black Hair \(Recorded Webinar\)](#)
- [About Wisconsin Wayfinder: Children's Resource Network \(Recorded Webinar\)](#)

Additional Resources

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