



Fostering Older Youth

"I need hope that things will be better."

Older youth in foster care are looking for hope, and foster parents play a huge role in providing that hope. That's one of the most rewarding aspects of fostering teens and older youth.

People are sometimes intimidated by the idea of fostering teens and older youth. Perhaps they've heard stories about how difficult teens in foster care can be. The teenage years can be challenging even without the added stressors of being placed in foster care. A teen in care is going through a difficult situation with very little control over what is happening to their family and themselves. A foster parent to a teen or older youth will have an opportunity to provide an environment of openness, compassion, and care that the teen needs to navigate this time in their life.

Teens need a different kind of care than a younger child. Developmentally, they have the ability and desire to make choices for themselves and a desire to start being more independent. Often, we see that while teens in care are approaching these developmental benchmarks, they are also losing the ability to make independent choices because the system they are involved in is making decisions for them. Additionally, the teens are being asked to bond with new caregivers when their developmental instincts tell them to explore their independence and autonomy. Being mindful of the developmental contradictions teens experience will increase the chance of connecting with them and understanding the pain and confusion they may be feeling.

An advantage of fostering older youth is their ability to reason and discuss things with their caregivers. They will depend on their caregiver to help them sort through everything they are thinking about. This could include learning to trust their new caregivers, worrying about approaching adulthood, and feeling responsible for making sure their family is going to be okay.

The truth is everybody needs somebody.

Here are some reasons to consider caring for teens in foster care:

- To guide and support a teen experiencing a difficult situation through no fault of their own.
- To help a teen feel seen, heard, and listened to when they have little to no control in other areas of their life.
- To help a teen discover new ways of being in relationships and community with others.
- To help teens build skills that will help them successfully navigate into adulthood.
- To affirm all the amazing strengths in them as they figure out who they are and who they want to

be.

- To be an additional source of support and safety in their lives.
- To experience the joy of learning the interests, hobbies, and hopes of the teen in your care.

When caring for teens becomes challenging

Just as with caring for any other teenager, things will not always be great. The teenage years are a time of enormous growth and development, and a time for trial and error. As a foster parent, you may find this difficult, especially if these mistakes involve school officials or law enforcement. One foster parent recognized, "You have to just kind of let go. I'm not saying don't have rules and enforce them. I'm saying these kids deserve to live as 'normal' a teenage life as their peers do, to really thrive, and sometimes that means messing up!"

You can help a youth in foster care learn the life lessons necessary to become a positive, functioning adult by allowing them to negotiate when possible, while clearly stating and maintaining boundaries that keep everyone safe.

Some of the skills that can help care for teens include:

- Strong, active listening skills
- Healthy boundary setting
- Openness to exploring the youth's interests
- Being able to advocate for youth
- Having patience

Some of these skills are inherent, while others you may have to learn, develop, and improve. (The Wisconsin Family Connections Center offers ongoing training opportunities to help you with these and many other skills.)

Beyond the teen years

Every year, many youths age out of the foster care system in Wisconsin. These young adults have no physical or relational permanency. They are simply on their own at 18.

Establishing connections to supportive adults is important for all youth, but it is essential for teens in foster care. This attachment can lead to a lifetime of more positive outcomes. The more positive adults in a youth's life, the less likely the youth is to have police involvement or abuse drugs and alcohol, and the better the youth will perform in school. Once you help create these bonds, they will likely never be forgotten.

There are many older youth in Wisconsin who need a strong, secure home right now. If you are looking to help right now, you may have a shorter wait if you're open to having an older child placed with you.

When you foster an older youth, you can help nurture hope that lets a young person get through today and look forward to tomorrow. You may not see their first steps, but you might watch them walk into adulthood with positive memories and hope for tomorrow.

Rita's Story

"When James came into our lives, he was almost 16. We were to be his third placement after two years in out-of-home care. He was one of three boys living in our home that summer.

James was an angry teenager. He refused to talk to the other boys, who were much younger than him, for the first two weeks. Since he spent a lot of time alone in his room, I tried to give him space to adjust. After a month of very little contact, I approached him to see if he would like to go to the movies, just the two of us. He shyly agreed. At the movies, we were talking, just small talk, before the show. He suddenly got anxious and demanded we leave. When I told him to wait, he yelled at me and stormed out. That would be typical of our interactions for the first six months.

I didn't know it then, but James was protecting himself. As time passed, he opened up, willingly spent time with the rest of the family, and even wrote a song for the other boys, who always looked up to him. On the day James left our home, he asked if we could go to the movies sometime. He said he always regretted not giving me a chance at first. I assured him I never held that night against him and was proud of the man he was becoming. We had our movie night a few months later, and he told me he had been accepted into college. If anything was worth those first six months of being unsure and a little uncomfortable, that moment was."

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- [FAW: Encouraging And Supporting Tweens And Teens In Care](#)
- *I Will Never Give Up*, by Derek Clark
- *Building Self-Esteem In Children And Teens Who Are Adopted Or Fostered*, by Dr. Sue Cornbluth
- *It Happened To Me – Adopted: The Ultimate Teen Guide*, by Suzanne Buckingham Slade
- [Supporting Teens Leaving Care: Resources & Guidance for Foster Parents](#)
- [Help! My Child Runs Away](#)
- [It's All in the Family: Establishing Household Rules](#)
- [Foster Parents and Social Workers: Allies and Advocates for Youth in Care](#)
- [Not Too Old for Forever: Adopting an Older Youth](#)
- [Being an Ally for LGBTQ+ Youth](#)

Learn in the [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Erasing the Belonging Gap Within Schools](#)
- [Building Relationships with School-age Children and Teens](#)
- [Strategies for Building Stronger Relationships with Teens](#)

Additional Resources

- [Teens Need Families](#)
- [Derek Clark](#)