

Chapter 5

FOSTER FAMILY SELF CARE



STATE OF WISCONSIN

Foster Parent Handbook

CHAPTER 5: FOSTER FAMILY SELF CARE

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INTRODUCTION: CHAPTER 5

Foster parenting is rewarding, difficult, and demanding all at the same time. Fostering brings many new experiences and challenges which may affect the child in foster care and the entire foster family. In order to ensure the best possible care for a child, it is important for a foster family to monitor stress levels and let the caseworker know if the family is feeling overwhelmed. This chapter covers the effects of fostering on the family, foster family grief and loss, the importance of coping and taking breaks, and connecting with others for support and information about foster parenting. On the next page, one foster parent describes her experience in a way that only foster parents can.

OPEN LETTER TO FOSTER PARENTS

When I am among foster parents, it becomes clear to me that we are the few—the privileged—each of us learning unique life lessons as only foster parents can.

I am sure every foster parent has a story to tell — some with laughter, some with tears, and some with total disbelief. We have taken on the challenge of caring for some of Wisconsin's most vulnerable children and most needy families.

Yet, the atmosphere amongst foster families is charged with commitment, humor, and positive energy (on most days). We drive minivans and SUV's (the economy cars belong to the social workers), and there are stories about children who've come and gone. We are not perfect. Our homes get cluttered (how many of you have a personal stash of children's clothing that rivals that of the local second-hand store?) and our schedules are busy. We may even forget appointments and anniversaries, and our idea of a social life is talking to the checkers at the local Wal-Mart.

We are focused on our job—our job of caring for children. Often, everything else must wait. Through it all, we learn. We live bigger and love deeper. We are foster parents, and we are privileged.

Toni Chambers, St.Croix County Foster Parent
May 2006 Recruitment Campaign Kick off in Eau Claire, Wisconsin

EFFECTS OF FOSTERING ON THE FAMILY

Foster parents need to take care of their needs and the needs of their own children just as they would take care of the needs of a child placed in their home. It takes time to adjust to the arrival of a child and the resulting change in dynamics of the whole family.

A child in foster care often arrives without the preparation that surrounds the birth of a child or sibling. The phone call, the family's decision, and the arrival of the child can all occur within a few hours. The child may be close in age (actual age or developmental level) to the foster family's own children, and children living in the home may have mixed emotions. The entire family needs to incorporate the foster child into family activities to help the child feel cared for and secure.

It is normal to request respite care or a break from fostering, either for an afternoon, a couple of days, or longer times. More information about respite is included later in this chapter. Some families choose to take short "time-outs" between foster care placements in their home to re-group as a family. Families should do what they need in order to continue to provide a stable and supportive home for a child and their family.

Children may worry about what happens to the children in foster care when they leave your home. They may need to be told that it's OK to grieve the loss of their foster brother or sister. Many foster parents keep pictures of children who have been part of their family to help family members remember the children who lived them.

(Reprinted from the Iowa Foster Family Handbook)

A Brother's View Point

Foster parents sometimes worry about the behavior of a foster child and the influence of that behavior on their children. While there are behaviors that foster parents need to manage, fostering can also have unexpected positive effects, as the story below illustrates.

In the past year and a half, my parents have had five kids, but now there are only three. Know why? It's because I have one brother and had three foster sisters. Our family adopted one of the foster children.

Our first foster child was a little girl who was 14 months old. She loved blocks, and could crawl as fast as a rabbit. She stayed for only two weeks and went to her grandma's house with her three brothers and sisters. Our next little foster girl was the same age. She learned to walk and talk at our house. She stayed with us for over a year. She never really learned to talk whole sentences, though. The best she could say would be like, "I wa eat." After a while, her dad did the stuff he needed to do to have her. He took classes and he promised he would be a good parent. After she visited him for a few days, she was given to him. When she left I was so sad. She had been part of the family, and I loved her so much!

Our third and final (for now) foster child had been in foster care for a year and was one and a half when she came to our house. She became our foster child in October of 2004, and then, in January of 2005, our family figured out she needed to be adopted. So, on April 28, 2005, we went to Children's Court to adopt her. The judge asked my mom and dad loads of questions and asked the social worker questions, too. She also asked Liam (my brother) and me questions, and we read our welcome letters to our sister. At the end of the time in court, the judge asked Liam and me to come up with her to the bench. She whispered to us to hit the gavel and declare, "This adoption is final!" I was very excited and relieved.

I am so glad that my parents participated in the foster care program. I still wish my other foster sisters were in my family too, but I'm satisfied with the brother and sister I have right now. Who knows? I might get another brother or sister from foster care.

*Reprinted from Fostering Across Wisconsin Vol. 1 Number 2.
"Sensational Sisters" by Jacob Scobey-Polachek*

WAYS IN WHICH FOSTER PARENTS ENCOUNTER LOSS AND GRIEF

Foster families may not expect feelings of grief or loss after a foster child leaves their home. But as the child moves on, the foster family loses the unique relationship that they had with that child. Foster family members will also face other kinds of grief, such as the grief a child experiences by being away from their family. Some examples are included in the box below.

Different Ways Foster Parents Experience Grief and Loss

- ❖ Grief felt by the child's parents when a child is removed.
- ❖ Feelings of loss felt by the child separated from his or her parents.
- ❖ Personal grief when their foster child is reunified with his or her family or placed in another foster or adoptive home.
- ❖ Grief of other members of the foster family when the child moves.
- ❖ Grief over the abuse or neglect experienced by the child.
- ❖ Grief over not being able to make a connection with a child or their family.

A person dealing with loss may feel depressed, anxious, or angry; foster parents may miss the child who has left the home. Members of the foster family may have difficulty concentrating, cry, exhibit restlessness, have trouble sleeping, avoid social contact and intimacy, and experience appetite disturbance and fatigue. These symptoms may be distressing to the members of the foster family, especially if the grief is unexpected.

Although the move of a child may be a deeply emotional time, it is potentially an opportunity for growth and change. Foster parents can use feelings of grief to build empathy for what parents feel when their child is removed, and for the losses of the children who have to leave their own homes.

For relative foster parents, the sense of grief and loss may feel very different from that of a foster parent who is not related to the child. Relative providers may also be grieving for the child and the birth parents because the child had to go into foster care. The foster parent might feel a sense of loss or embarrassment for their family to be involved in the child welfare system, and may also feel a sense of loss like any other foster parent when the child leaves the foster home. Relative providers may have similar fears about what will happen to the child and if the move was a positive one.

Relative providers should talk with their licensing worker about getting connected to foster parent support groups that address the grief and loss of relative caregivers.

Facing intense circumstances of grief and loss can be difficult, and foster parents should allow time to work through and recover from such experiences. The box below includes suggestions for how to work through difficult times.

Tips for Dealing with Grief and Loss

- ❖ Connect with foster care and adoption support groups.
- ❖ Use respite providers as necessary.
- ❖ Allow time to grieve the loss of the child.
- ❖ Think about taking a short break from fostering every now and then.
- ❖ Talk with your licensor about your needs; they want to provide foster parents with the resources they need to be successful.

COPING AND SUPPORT

Parenting children with special needs demands an enormous amount of time and energy. It is important to continually evaluate whether these demands can be managed and when to ask for additional help.

Everyone gives and receives support in unique ways. The ways we are most comfortable giving support may not be the same ways we like to receive support. Foster parents should take a few moments and, using the box below as a guide, talk with someone close to them about the types of support they like to give and receive to create sources of support for when things might get stressful.

Things to think about and discuss with someone you trust:

- ❖ How do I receive support?
- ❖ Who provides me with support?
- ❖ How do I give support?
- ❖ To whom do I give support?
- ❖ Do I have as many people to support me as the number of people I support?

Remember: In order to take care of our children, foster parents need to take care of themselves.

WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

To continue to provide quality foster care, it is important for foster parents to let the child's caseworker or their licensor know if they are feeling stressed. It is the foster parent's responsibility to keep the agency informed and their right to request assistance when needed. The foster care licensing agency should work with the foster family to connect them with resources to support both the children placed in the foster home and the foster family.

Respite Care

Respite is the temporary care of a child in foster care provided by another family for a day or weekend. Respite can provide a much needed break for the foster family and child. Most parents take breaks away from their children – to go shopping, see a movie, get away for a night, or just do nothing at all. It is very normal for foster parents to need breaks from the responsibilities of providing foster care. Respite can be for a few hours or a couple days.

Agencies handle respite care in different ways. Foster parents should talk with their licensing agency about the possibility of building their own system of caregivers who can provide care for children in their home. Some agencies require respite providers to be licensed foster parents, so foster parents should ask their licensing worker for more information about the ability to use informal resources, like relatives, friends, or other foster parents.

SUPPORT GROUPS AND FOSTER PARENT ASSOCIATIONS

There are aspects of fostering that only parents and families who foster can fully understand. A variety of foster parent groups and associations both across the state and nationally can connect foster parents for peer support and information. Below is information about support groups and foster parent associations, including what they are and how foster parents can find out if they are available in their area.

It is important to remember that information about a child in foster care and their families must be kept **confidential** even with other foster parents. Foster parents can discuss challenges they are experiencing in a general way without sharing specific details about an individual child or family.

A **support group** is a network of foster parents who come together to share ideas, experiences, and concerns related to the children in their homes. It's a way for families to talk about the joys and frustrations that come with being foster parents. These groups may meet in person, through newsletters, online, or by telephone.

In some groups, the focus is on sharing among foster parents. In others, it is on advocacy. Still others focus on education and training. Groups may combine all of these at one time or another. Foster parents should check with the licensing agency to see if there is an agency group of foster parents that meets in their area.

A **foster parent association** is a more formal organization that works to support foster parents by providing opportunities for networking and training. Foster parent associations often do advocacy work for issues impacting children in foster care and foster parents.

Below is information about two foster parent associations that may be of interest to foster families:

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parents Association

The Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA) is a statewide organization dedicated to supporting foster and adoptive parents. WFAPA provides a quarterly newsletter containing legislative updates, articles about foster care issues, a calendar of upcoming events, and information about their spring and fall conferences. WFAPA conferences are a great way for foster parents to obtain education, training, support, and encouragement from fellow foster parents. **For more information about WFAPA, visit their web site at: www.wfapa.org**

National Foster Parent Association

The National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) is the only national organization that supports foster parents and advocates on behalf of all children. The NFPA hosts an

annual conference and offers a variety of information on their web site. Membership in the NFPA is open to anyone interested in improving the foster care program and enhancing the lives of children and families. **For more information about the NFPA, visit their web site at www.nfpaonline.org or call 1-800-557-5238.**

For more information about other support groups, associations, and resources available in Wisconsin, talk to your licensor or contact the **Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center** at www.wifostercareandadoption.org or call **1-800-762-8063.**

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

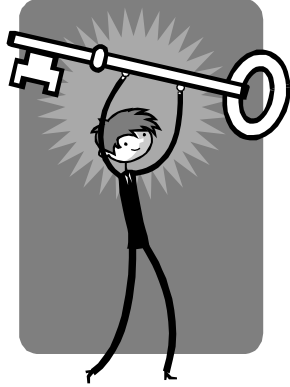
To make educated decisions, it is critical for foster families to continue learning about issues affecting children in foster care. This handbook gives only a general overview of various topic areas. Foster parents will need additional, more specific information and training to help increase their understanding and meet the ever-changing needs of children in foster care.

The box below contains suggestions of basic topics that foster parents may want to start learning more about to expand their understanding of issues related to foster care.

Some helpful topics may include:

- ❖ Effects of child abuse and neglect.
- ❖ Working with children with behavioral, emotional, or physical challenges.
- ❖ Information about bonding, attachment, and attachment disorders.
- ❖ Cross-cultural parenting.
- ❖ Working with special education.
- ❖ Information about mental health disorders in children.
- ❖ Working with children with sexualized behaviors.
- ❖ Building successful working relationships with children's families.

The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center has an extensive library with information about the issues above. They can help foster parents locate information on these and other topics related to foster care and adoption. Foster parents can contact the Resource Center at: www.wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-762-8063. Local libraries and the Internet are also good sources for additional information.



KEY CONCEPTS

CHAPTER 5

- ❖ In order to ensure the best possible care for children, it is important for foster families to identify their stress levels and let the caseworker know if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- ❖ The experience of fostering children may have unexpected positive and negative effects on all of the children in the home.
- ❖ Although the move of a child may be a deeply emotional time for the foster family, it is potentially an opportunity for growth and change.
- ❖ It is important to continually evaluate whether the demands of fostering can be managed and when to ask for additional help.
- ❖ It is the foster parent's responsibility to keep the agency informed and their right to request assistance when needed.
- ❖ A foster parent support group is a network of foster parents who come together to share ideas, experiences, and concerns related to the children in their home.
- ❖ A foster parent association is typically an organization that strives to support foster parents and to advocate on behalf of all children.
- ❖ Continued learning can help foster parents understand and support the ongoing needs of the children placed in their home.