

STEP BY STEP



TO EFFECTIVE PARENTING

Foster Families and How They Grow:
Understanding the Effects of Fostering
on the Family

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About Step by Step

Parenting is both an exciting and challenging journey. Having a child to love, nurture, and encourage is a blessing. However the journey is filled with challenges which are sometimes puzzling and at other times frustrating. This booklet and others in the series are designed to help you sort through the steps in helping a child grow and develop to reach her fullest potential.

Each booklet contains core information on parenting attitudes, skills and abilities. There are activities to work through to help in applying each strategy. While the booklets contain information which can lead to more effective parenting, it may not answer all the questions a parent might have in the area presented. It is therefore recommended that each and every parent join the thousands of other parents in the journey for lifelong learning. Parenting is a step by step learning process.

We invite you to read all our titles and join us in one of our many different training sessions. We look forward to walking together with you step by step to effective parenting!

Sincerely,

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FOSTER PARENTING

What is a foster parent? A foster parent is a person who chooses to become a temporary parent to an unrelated or related child with the goal of creating a safe, loving and healing environment for an abused or neglected child. Sounds simple. Simply love a child. However, being a foster parent can be a challenging task and to be successful, foster parents need to understand the effect fostering will have on themselves and on their families.

A disturbing statistic from the National Foster Parent Association demonstrates that approximately 40% of an incoming pre-service class who completed the course and are licensed as foster parents will drop out within the first two years.¹ Other studies indicate the dropout rate to be as high as 50%.² Reasons given by foster parents who dropped out early in their experience included: lack of communication with the agency and lack of support, lack of services, serious behavioral issues from children, impact on their own permanent children, and lack of extended family support.³

With the high rate of dropout occurring within the first two years, it is crucial that foster parents understand the stages of foster parent development they will experience. They need to understand the emerging role and its demands and the key issues that impact adult relationships. Foster parents can avoid becoming one of those “dropout” statistics, as they begin to understand what they will encounter and how they can grow through those experiences.

The next few pages of this guide address a number of effects of fostering on the family and offers strategies to manage those expectations.

- Stages of Foster Parent Development
- Understanding Foster Parents’ Emerging Role
- Key Issues within Foster Care that Impact Adult Relationships
- Foster Parents Key Tasks

- Strategies for Success



STAGES OF FOSTER PARENT DEVELOPMENT

Stage One: Room for One More

Foster parents in this stage do not know what they don't know. They are motivated to become foster parents because they love children, are close to becoming empty-nesters, love parenting, but don't want anymore permanent children. They want to take the child home and love her and not be bothered with working with the agency or the birth family.

First Developmental Crisis - Going through the Fire

Growth and development as a foster family often comes as a part of the process of going "through the fire." This crucial period for the foster family occurs during the first two years or so of their fostering experience. Although the family received information about what to expect in pre-service training, now that they are living it out, it feels differently than what they expected. A critical component that brings this stage to crisis is the foster family's realization that "love is not enough," and the child has another family he or she cares about very much. The child will most likely return to that family. The end result of these crises can be the foster family ending their foster care career as a result of going through the fire. If they manage to survive Stage One, they will move on to the next stage of development.

Some of the events that characterize going through the fire are:

- unmet expectations
- feeling that needs are not met
- the child's behavior – problematic behavior of the child

- lack of responsiveness from agency/caseworker
- court decisions
- lack of extended family support
- difficulties working with the birth family, and
- announcement that the child is now returning home

Stage Two: Team Member

This family has experienced a crisis or two and has moved on from the first developmental stage. The foster family continues to view the birth family from a distance, as opposed to being actively involved with them. The foster caregivers still wait for directions from caseworkers and are not self-initiating in responding to what they feel are needs of the child in their care. They join the team, but they are not leading it. They show up at meetings and participate actively within the agency structure. The agency often views this family as the “best” kind of family to have because they do what they are asked and do not make waves.

Second Developmental Crisis/Change

The foster family will go through another developmental crisis in this stage that will impact their decision to either continue or drop out. The crisis may be a disagreement regarding a decision about the child in their home. Perhaps the disagreement involved the child returning home, lack of timely services, or the selection of an adoptive family. They don't see the child being served by the team. The impact feels to the parents as though they had no input into the decision-making process.

Stage Three: Team Leader

This family has made a decision to continue in the fostering program, and it is evident by their participation in training, support groups, etc. They view themselves and their purpose in fostering from a much more pro-active perspective. This foster family actively works with primary families toward

the goal of permanency. The foster caregiver feels a responsibility to obtain appropriate services for their child and often take the lead in seeking those needed services. The team-leader family plays a key role for the particular child they have in their home. Often, this foster family is needed most within the agency to serve the needs of children and their families. However, agencies sometimes feel threatened by these families, and discourage an active team leader role.

Third Developmental Crisis/Change

The challenges often encountered for this family occur when the family begins to believe that, no matter how hard they work with the caseworker or primary family, they will not be able to secure for the child in their care the end result they feel is in that child's best interest. They feel they can't get necessary services in a timely manner. This family believes they must work to help change the system by assuming an advocacy role beyond just the child in their direct care.

Stage Four: Child Advocate

This family sees its role as expanding to that of child advocate, and family members feel they can have a voice in changing foster care and the child welfare system. They may choose to leave their active participation as a foster parent to spend more time and energy on advocacy.

A foster caregiver's stage of development is key as she develops understanding of the various roles that are required of her.⁴

- Reader question: With what stage do you identify? Why?



UNDERSTANDING FOSTER PARENTS' EMERGING ROLES

As foster caregivers understand “how they grow” in the stages discussed above, it is important for them to also have insight into their emerging roles. What exactly are their multiple roles? What is expected of them? What are those tasks they need to do to fulfill all of those roles?

Some of the roles are congruent with the first stage of foster family development, the Room for One More stage (i.e., nurturing the child, providing basic needs, empathy, transportation, help with homework, etc.). Some of the expected roles are more congruent with the second or third stages, Team Member (attending counseling) or Team Leader (providing supervised visitation). A fourth-stage family, a Child Advocate, advocates for special educational services, pushing the community to accommodate a child's special needs.

The system expects foster caregivers to provide all of these roles during their first foster care placement experience. However, many of the roles are not congruent with the development of a new foster caregiver. Expectations for tasks beyond the developmental stage of the newly licensed foster caregiver add significantly to the stress level and account for the high dropout rate of newly licensed caregivers.

Because of the shifts in philosophy from "rescuing" children, to returning children home as soon as it is safe to do so, to preventing placement of children, to providing family-centered services with a goal of expected permanency, there are significant changes in the expectations of foster caregivers. How have their job expectations changed?

First, the **demands are greater**. Children entering foster care are typically more severely disturbed emotionally and behaviorally than foster children of the past.

Second, **the requirements are greater**. Foster caregivers, as appropriate role models, are now being asked to work directly with primary parents to provide guidance and support on nurturing and disciplining their children.

Third, **the expectations are greater**. Foster caregivers are being asked to assume more of a role as professional caregiver and are asked to function as team members with the child welfare agency staff.

Due to these ever increasing expectations, four specific roles emerge for foster caregivers:

- Parent – The foster caregiver provides basic parenting functions.
- Team Member – The foster caregiver functions as a member of the child protection services team.
- Treatment Agent – The foster caregiver provides a therapeutic environment for the child.
- Child Advocate – The foster caregiver actively seeks and helps develop services the child needs with the agency, the community, and the school. ⁵

The Roles and Tasks

Parenting: This family provides the basic necessities for the child.

Basic parenting functions:

- Provide food, clothing
- Provide discipline
- Provide nurturance
- Attend school meetings, functions

- Help with homework
- Listen
- Play and have fun
- Offer child new experiences

Team Member: This family functions as a member of the child protection services team whose purpose it is to protect the child and provide her with services that will lead to permanency.

Basic team member functions:

- Attend agency meetings
- Attend foster parent training
- Attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings
- Contribute to the Semi Annual Review(SAR) and Case Plan
- Transport child to visitation
- Work on some level with birth parents

Treatment Agent: The family is a therapeutic environment for the child.

Basic treatment agent functions:

- Transport the child to and participate in counseling sessions
- Document behavior issues
- Implement therapeutic home plan
- Administer prescribed meds
- Deal with child after birth family visit
- Help assess developmental level of the child

Child Advocate: The foster parent actively seeks and helps develop services the child needs with the agency, in the community, and in school.

Basic treatment agent functions:

- Advocate for child at agency meetings/SAR
- Attend foster parent training on how to be an advocate
- Advocate for child at IEP meetings
- Advocate for child's needs within the community/school
- Work with Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) and Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)



KEY ISSUES WITHIN FOSTER CARE THAT IMPACT ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

When foster children enter foster homes, they can have a significant impact on the adult relationships in that home, as well as on the birth or other permanent children. The key issues for adult relationships are:

1. **Splitting** – Splitting is the psychological phenomenon—an inner defense—which explains why foster and adopted children think in such all-or-nothing terms. Some classic examples of splitting are:
 - The child views himself alternately as all-wonderful or as totally worthless.
 - The child idealizes the foster or adoptive father and devalues the mother.
 - The child views his teacher or caseworker positively for a while, but when he feels aggrieved or wronged, he suddenly rejects these people totally.
 - The child perceives maltreating biological parents as sainted and the foster or adoptive parents as devilish.
2. **Reverse Effect** – A child can consciously or unconsciously influence relationships within the home and the relative stability or instability of

the placement. The child's disturbing influence evokes debilitating problems in family members. The child controls the emotional temperature of the home.

3. **Reenactment** – Reenactment is defined as the recreation of old relationships with new people. Another term is transference. Foster children often recreate destructive relationships in the foster home, which often presents barriers to attachment formation and sabotage the placement.⁶
4. **Pseudo- attachment** – Many foster parents hear a foster child immediately call them “mom or dad” and interpret this to mean that the child actually “feels” that way. This has more to do with the role that child sees them in, not the relationship behind it.
5. **Dragger/Draggee** – This familiar problem exists when one person in a relationship is excited and motivated about fostering and the other person is not. The dragger is constantly dragging the reluctant person. Occasionally, the dragger may “pay-back” his spouse in a variety of ways to express his frustration.
6. **Loss of Privacy** – When families enter the foster care system, the family not only loses privacy in the home due to the presence of new children, but loses a sense of privacy due to the completion of the homestudy and regular involvement of caseworkers coming in and out of their home.
7. **Grief and Loss – When a Child Leaves** – When foster children leave, families do experience grief and loss on varying levels. They are greatly impacted by where the child is going:
 - Returning to an uncertain future with the birth family
 - Being removed to another foster placement (guilt – perhaps a failed placement)
 - Being adopted (mixed emotions)



FOSTER PARENTS KEY TASKS

A tremendous challenge stands before foster and adoptive parents while caring for an abused or neglected child. There are three main tasks in parents' responses to their child's trauma and behavior:

- Believing and validating their child's experiences
- Tolerating their child's affect
- Managing their own emotional responses⁷

Believing and Validating Their Child's Experiences

"Dillon's caseworker told us about the extreme sexual abuse he experienced as a toddler. I knew it was true, but believing such horror could be done to a child is another thing. Can you know something is true, but still not believe it? I know that doesn't make sense. I know it is true. I just have to believe it."

Christa, adoptive mom of four-year-old Dillon

For many adoptive parents, believing and validating their child's abuse experiences is a tremendous challenge. No one wants to accept the fact that the innocence of the beautiful child who is now part of the family was stolen by physical, emotional, psychological or sexual abuse. To believe it means to feel it as well.

Tolerating Their Child's Effect

"If you had told me a year ago that I would be tolerating certain behaviors in my home, I would have said, 'You are crazy!' But now, here we are, navigating through these behavioral challenges that were so unexpected."

Carolyn and Rick, parents of nine-year-old Jacob

One of the most important character traits for adoptive parents of traumatized children is flexibility—extreme flexibility. Juli Alvarado, an adoptive mother, treatment foster parent, and adoption therapist, uses the expression, “expanding your window of tolerance.” Old ways of managing difficult behaviors may not work. Parents find themselves dealing with behaviors that are totally out of the sphere of their previous parenting experiences.

Managing Their Own Emotional Responses

“I had no idea that I could get so incredibly angry,” David stated. “I have always been able to manage my own emotions, but this seven-year-old triggers such frustration and anger in me, I feel out of control.”

David, adoptive dad of seven-year-old Bekah

Hundreds of foster and adoptive parents were surveyed in workshops across the country. They were asked, “Of the three elements above, which is most difficult for you?” they responded overwhelmingly: “managing our own emotional responses.” Why would this be true for so many? Many adoptive parents find themselves in an unfamiliar place. They perhaps have had parenting experience, but only parenting non-traumatized children. They have not cared for children who lack extreme impulse control, who have problems with boundaries, oppositional behavior, difficulty expressing emotions, and so on. They are at a time and place in their lives they have never been. It has stopped feeling good, and they do not like what they are becoming.



FINAL STEP

Strategies for Success

Even when exposed to high levels of stress, individuals can prevent crisis through effective coping strategies. The following list of coping strategies can assist foster parents in preventing stress from escalating into crisis.

- Recall often that you are not source of your child's problems.
- Maintain a sense of humor.
- Connect with other foster and adoptive parents.
- Stop comparing yourself to other families.
- Find an adoption-competent family therapist.
- Stay regulated. Don't jump into the child's fear.
- Find outlets for your own emotional, spiritual, and physical needs and design opportunities to enjoy those.
- Do a role check. Is one parent carrying most of the load?
- Choose your battles and win the war.
- Stop, drop, and roll. (Stop talking. Drop into your breathing. Roll back into your relationship with your child.)
- Identify who owns the problem.
- Take a break—find respite care.
- Remember the child's progress will not always be consistent.
- Look for patterns in your child's outbursts. If you understand his triggers, you may be able to prevent an explosion altogether, or lessen the intensity significantly.
- Use family meetings creatively.
- Find ways to have fun with your child—increase your positive interactions.
- Reframe your definition of success and celebrate small gains.⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Rhodes, K; Orme, J; Cox, M. & Buehler, C.(Sep 2003) Foster family resources, psychosocial function, and retention, *Social Work Research*, 27, 3, 135-149.
- ² Rhodes, K; Orme, J. & Buehler, C. (Mar 2001) A comparison of family foster parents who quit, consider quitting, and plan to continue fostering. *Social Service Review*, 75, 1, 31p.
- ³ Rhodes, K; Orme, J. & Buehler, C. *ibid*.
- ⁴ This booklet is adapted from *Foster Families and How They Grow*, a training curriculum prepared by the Institute for Human Services, Columbus, Ohio for the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program, 2005.
- ⁵ Schooler, J. and Jorgenson, K. (2000). *A System in Transition: Examining Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention in the New Millennium Training Manual*, (Seattle, WA: National Foster Parent Association, page 32).
- ⁶ Delaney, Richard (1998) *Fostering Changes: Treating Attachment-Disordered Foster Children*, (Oklahoma City, Ok: Woods 'N' Barnes Publishing), page 27.
- ⁷ A. Cook, J Spinazzola, J. Ford, et. al"Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents," *Psychiatric Annals*, 35:5 (May 2005): 390-398
- ⁸ J.Schooler, B.Smalley, T. Callahan, 2009, *Wounded Children:Healing Homes* (Colorado Springs:NavPress)

OTHER STEP BY STEP TITLES WITH NUMBERS

1. Understanding Child Development – Birth to Two – “The Infant”
2. Understanding Child Development – Three to Five – “The Preschooler”
3. Understanding Child Development – Six to Eleven – “The School Aged Child”
4. Understanding Child Development – Twelve to Fifteen – “The Young Teen”
5. Understanding Child Development – Sixteen to Eighteen – “The Older Teen”
6. Communication – Responding to Children
7. Communication – Feelings
8. Communication – Asking Children Strength- Focused Questions
9. Communication – Being Direct with Children
10. Communication - The Languages of Love for Your Child
11. Communication – What you Say and How you Say It
12. What Every Parent Should Know About Child Abuse
13. Sharing Secrets and Keeping Surprises – James’s Story
14. Teaching Your Child to Say, “NO” – Jessica’s Story
15. Understanding Childhood Illnesses
16. Caring for a Sick Child
17. Disease and How it Spreads
18. First Aide – What Parents Need to Know
19. Home Safety
20. Childproofing Your Home
21. Teaching Safety
22. Food Safety
23. Foodborn Illness
24. Nutrition
25. Feeding Problems
26. Bringing a Foster Child Into Your Home
27. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Family
28. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Marriage
29. Guide to Dealing with Stress As a Parent
30. Guide to Building a Healthy Marriage Relationship
31. Bringing our Adopted Child into Our Home
32. Helping Children Understand Adoption
33. Joining With my Adopted Child’s Culture
34. Understanding the Birth Parent of My Child
35. The Blended Family
36. When Family Members Treat My Foster or Adoptive Child Different
37. Understanding Attachment
38. Recreating History for My Adopted Child
39. Helping the Child who has been Sexually Abused

40. Teaching about Sexuality
 - a. How to Talk to Your Child
 - b. How to Talk to Your Parents
41. Understanding Sexual Behaviors
42. Teaching Your Child about Abstinence
43. Talking to your Teen about Identity
44. Contracting with Your Teen About Behavior
45. Developing Responsibility
46. Teaching Your Child to Build Relationships
47. Teaching about Marriage and Family
48. Telling Your Child Someone has Died
49. Understanding the Grieving Cycle
50. Understanding and Approaching Behavior
51. Dealing with Lying
52. Toilet Training and Bedwetting
53. Dealing with Defiance
54. Dealing with Hitting and Biting
55. Dealing with Stealing
56. Dealing with Anger
57. Dealing with Fighting
58. The Child Who Plays With Fire
59. Helping My Child Deal with Fear
60. Helping My Child Kick a Bad Habit
61. Help with Tattling
62. Dealing with the Two Year Old's Temper Tantrum
63. Help with Thumb Sucking
64. Help with Bedtime Problems
65. Dealing with Substance Abuse
66. Understanding Suicide
67. Developing Good Study Habits for School
68. Dealing with Failure
69. Demonstrating Manners
70. Helping Siblings Get Along
71. Nurturing Optimism

MORE TITLES TO BE DEVELOPED IN THE FUTURE