

Guide to Supporting Foster Parents

*A project of the Wisconsin Foster Parent Retention & Support Subcommittee
(a subcommittee of the Wisconsin Foster Parent Training Committee)*

The **Guide to Supporting Foster Parents** concisely outlines the support needs of foster parents within a developmental framework. The support needs were identified through current research and data obtained from previous Wisconsin initiatives. These needs were organized into six broader categories:

- Foster Parent Development
- Emotional Well-Being
- Professional Member of the Team
- Resource Support
- Crisis Needs
- Financial Support

Brief Overview of Research

Several studies painted a disheartening picture of the foster care system, citing disproportionate ratios of foster parents to children needing placement, and a shortage of experienced foster parents to care for children with special needs due to low retention rates. High dropout rates among foster parents contribute to disruptions for children. Approximately 40% of foster families discontinue fostering within the first two years (Ohio Child Welfare Training Program, 2005). Lack of agency support was ranked by former foster parents as the top reason for quitting (Christian, 2002).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services conducted a major research study involving three states, including New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Oregon (Gibbs, 2005).

The following conclusions were found:

- Foster parents' median length of service was 8 to 14 months. This unexpectedly short time span is less than the average length of stay in care for many foster children.
- In looking at patterns of placements, one-fifth of all licensed foster parents are caring for the majority of children (60 – 80%) in foster care.
- At least one in five foster homes ceased fostering each year.

Gibbs (2005) states, “Though longevity is of course not the only goal for foster parents, preventing the unnecessary loss of qualified foster parents would significantly enhance child welfare systems’ ability to enhance the safety, permanency, and well-being for children in their care” (p. ES-4).

Wisconsin has made numerous strides in improving services, resources, and training to foster parents; however the need for greater support continues to exist. This commitment is reflected in the Program Enhancement Plan to “increase the effectiveness of support for foster parents by improving their access to information, training, and resources” (WI Department of Health and Family Services- DCFS, 2006).

Development of the Guide to Supporting Foster Families

The Foster Parent Retention and Support Subcommittee formed several conclusions that paved the way for developing the ***Guide to Supporting Foster Parents***:

- There must be stronger efforts to ***retain existing foster parents*** in order to build a system that can meet the challenging needs of foster children and youth. Research indicates that agencies lose between 30-50% of foster homes each year, and estimates that 40% of new foster parents quit within their first year of licensing.
- ***Losing foster parents within the two years of licensing is costly***, fiscally and through loss of staff time spent screening, licensing, training, and monitoring. It is estimated that it takes 4 months to license a foster home in Wisconsin.
- ***Placement disruption is even more costly***, creating crisis that consumes foster care coordination and case manager time and results in trauma for the child being moved to a new foster home.
- Placement disruption is often ***prevented through positive and supportive relationships*** between the foster parents and the agency.
- Foster parents not only need ***more support***, but the support that is given should ***target various aspects of foster parent roles***. To be most effective, support should be adjusted to meet the developmental stage of the foster parent.

The developmental functioning of foster parents is a significant factor in providing any type of support to foster parents. Despite statewide and agency efforts to improve the level and quality of support overall, activities that do not match the developmental needs of the foster parents are rendered ineffective. The use of targeted support will best meet the needs of individual foster parents and save money and time spent on less effective interventions.

This document is meant to serve as an informal guide to best supporting foster parents. The suggestions are not all-inclusive and may vary based on other factors, such as personal characteristics of the foster parents or specific needs of the child in care. This Guide serves to promote communication with foster parents about their needs, help to assess the agencies' existing methods of supporting foster families, and perhaps identify some factors that may be involved when the current support system is failing. The suggestions include many activities that can be implemented without significant cost to the agency. These support methods may be currently provided but may need some tweaking to ensure that the focus is truly in-line with the foster parents' needs.

Supporting foster parents effectively cannot be achieved by foster care staff alone. These suggestions incorporate support needs as they relate to working within the foster care system, as well as with case managers, team members, administrators, foster parents, and other professionals. Sharing this resource and opening a dialogue about how to improve support to each and every foster parent is crucial to building a stronger foster care system.

Introduction

The ***Guide to Supporting Foster Parents*** brings together essential strategies for supporting foster parents across a developmental continuum and includes the following components:

- Explanation of support needs and foster parent developmental stages
- General “Ways to Support Foster Parents” within each area of need
- Developmental Stage-specific suggestions for supporting foster parents within each area of need

Support Needs

Foster parents need more support. This message is widely proclaimed across the literature, across the nation, and among foster parents.

Increasing the level and quality of support can improve retention of foster families and decrease placement disruption for children in care. Disruption has life-long implications for foster children, and puts a significant burden on the workload of staff. Losing foster families is costly- the resources invested in recruiting, licensing, and training alone are significant. Supporting foster parents reduces the risk of more costly, more restrictive placements for children who disrupt from foster homes. Foster families strongly identify that having a collaborative relationship with the agency that includes open communication and active participation as team members is crucial to retention.

Based on research and discussions, the Subcommittee has identified 6 key areas of support for foster families with suggestions of how to meet the needs of foster parents in each area. **The areas of support include: Foster Parent Development, Emotional Well-Being, Professional Member of the Team, Resource Support, Crisis Needs, and Financial Support.**

Increased financial support is a universal need for all foster parents, regardless of the developmental stage; therefore it was excluded as a separate category from the guide.

Developmental Stages

Foster parents function on a continuum of developmental stages, which have become known as the **“Room for One More” Parent**, the **“Team Member” Parent**, the **“Team Leader” Parent**, and the **“Child Advocate” Parent**. Each stage brings strengths and challenges. There is no hierarchy or “desired” outcome for foster families except to gain more experience and learn skills to function within their roles. No matter how long a family stays licensed, they may be perfectly content in their current stage and stay there throughout their career. This certainly does not mean that they are less valuable, or that they *should* be progressing along to the next stage. Not everyone would aspire to operate as a Child Advocate! We need all kinds of foster families to meet the variety of needs of children in care.

Despite the developmental stage they might identify with the strongest, foster families will continue to acquire characteristics, knowledge and skills relevant to each stage through training and experience. There may also be events or circumstances that will cause movement back and forth along the continuum. Much like the Stages of Grief and Loss, where individuals may shift around to any of the stages (denial, bargaining, anger, depression, resolution) as they work through the grief process, foster families will reposition around the developmental stages as well, and need the level of support that best matches where they are developmentally at that particular time. It is important for agencies to recognize subtle or dramatic shifts and talk with foster families about how to adjust the type and level of support to the family’s needs.

Some of the events that may trigger a shift include:

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| new child placed | difficulty managing child's behavior | family crisis |
| foster child leaving the home | lack of support from extended family | negative relationship with birth family |
| allegation of maltreatment | change in case manager/service provider | postive growth in relationship with birth family |
| systems challenges (worker, court) | opportunity to provide community education | successful transition to independent living |

Supporting Foster Parents Across the Developmental Continuum

Using the developmental stages is a ***way to understand foster families*** and their functioning within foster parent roles. Getting stuck on labeling the foster parent can limit the worker's ability to recognize growth, leading to missed opportunities to utilize their potential contributions. The stages are not meant to be used as a measuring stick to compare foster parents to each other or determine how they fit with where the agency would like them to be. Each foster family has inherent strengths and unique abilities, and applying a developmental framework will simply help agencies to educate and support foster families in the way that is most meaningful to them.

The Foster Parent Retention and Support Subcommittee has developed this guide for agencies to help identify ways in which different components of support can be provided based on the developmental stage of the foster parent. Most of these suggestions are practical, cost-effective, and often draw on human resources already present in the foster care system.

Ways to Support Foster Families

AREA OF SUPPORT	AREA-SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS
<p>Foster Parent Development</p> <p><i>Targets the knowledge and skills that promote successful functioning in the foster parent role</i></p>	<p>Training</p> <p>Foster parents should assist in developing a Training Plan</p> <p>Action planning/discussion integrated into training</p> <p>Training should be effective, and include behavioral training, specialized topics, and advanced level</p> <p>Foster parents should receive general training (Foundation)</p> <p>Training should include knowledge and skills to develop self-support and effective advocacy</p> <p>Manuals/Policies</p> <p>Responsibilities and roles</p> <p>Self-evaluation</p> <p>Professionalism</p> <p>New foster parent orientation/support</p> <p>Involvement in retention efforts</p> <p>Role satisfaction</p> <p>Clear expectations</p> <p>Co-training</p> <p>Mentally challenging work</p> <p>Communication skills</p> <p>Skill development in working with birth families</p> <p>Understanding culture</p>
<p>Emotional Well-Being</p> <p><i>Targets aspects that build capacity to alleviate distress, frustration, and loss relevant to the demands of foster parenting</i></p>	<p>Increased/ improved quality case manager contacts</p> <p>Networking</p> <p>Mentoring</p> <p>Respite and relief</p> <p>Support planning</p> <p>Recognition (agency and community)</p> <p>Community awareness and support</p> <p>Burnout/secondary traumatic stress</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact on relationships Meeting family needs for support Balancing demands Respect Celebrating achievements Role satisfaction Assistance with birth families Grief/loss Understanding of cultural beliefs and practices
<p>Professional Member of the Team</p> <p><i>Targets the promotion of foster parent participation and successful teamwork</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treated as professionals Teaming Comprehensive information sharing Input/engaged in decisions Mutual assessment Increased funding for participation in services Regular case staffings Increased communication Involvement in case planning Conference calling if foster parents not available Feedback about foster care program Exit surveys Disruption planning/processing Involved in training planning Involvement in Court proceedings
<p>Resource Support</p> <p><i>Targets the provision of adequate knowledge, skills and services to care for foster children and maintain connections to other foster parents</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing barriers to services Increased community awareness Quality face-to-face contacts Increased services for foster children Faster response time for phone calls Written information on benefits and reimbursements Equipment to accommodate special needs Child or Family counseling to deal with conflicts in the home

	<p>Transportation</p> <p>Childcare</p> <p>Culturally specific resources</p> <p>Information (newsletters, training notices, resources lists)</p> <p>Opportunities for socialization</p>
<p>Crisis Needs</p> <p><i>Targets tangible and intangible resources to reinforce foster parents' abilities to manage crisis and emergency placements</i></p>	<p>Increased caseworker support at placement</p> <p>Formal, child-specific crisis plan</p> <p>Funding to cover unplanned costs and supplies for emergencies</p> <p>Crisis support system (24 hours/phone)</p> <p>Respite and Relief</p> <p>Opportunity to process disruptions and requests for removal</p> <p>Allegations of CAN</p> <p>Help in dealing with difficult behaviors and special needs</p> <p>Preparation and support for transitions (understanding their role)</p>
<p>Financial Support</p>	<p>Adequate services</p> <p>Increased rates and reimbursements</p> <p>Funding for supplies</p> <p>Community support (financial and provision of services)</p> <p>System of "Equitable Rewards"</p> <p>Paid respite/daycare as relief</p>

The “Room for One More” Parent		
AREA OF SUPPORT	DESCRIPTION OF CHALLENGES	PRIMARY STAGE-SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS
Foster Parent Development	In this stage, foster parents need intense guidance and direction, but often they may not see the benefits. Training tends to work best when required as part of licensing or placement. The agency is expected to have told them “everything” they needed to know prior to placement. Foster parents tend to believe that they have the inherent skills to foster a child, which may increase eagerness to accept placement of children that may be beyond their abilities. Agency focus on foster parent development should target on increasing understanding of foster parenting and building basic skills.	Foundation Training Manuals/Policies Responsibilities and Roles New foster parent orientation/support Clear expectations Communication Skills (basic “how tos”) Basic skills in working with birth families (pre-placement/foundation training)
Emotional Well-Being	Foster parents in this stage start out naive about the experience of fostering, and may become more aware as placements increase. Foster parents have less capability to discern “good matches” for their family due to self-confidence in skills and lack of experience. They are often willing to take on more than they can handle, putting children at risk of disruption. Once placement occurs, they are reliant on agency to provide solutions for the child’s behavior and disruption to the foster family, as well as provide a surplus of positive reinforcement. Foster parents may resist recommendations or fail to carry them out over time if they are not immediately effective.	Increased case manager contacts (directive, frequent-despite indicating that they do not need it) Networking (with other foster parents) Mentor (match with experienced foster parent) Respite and Relief (may not be willing to use or may overuse) Intrinsic Impact on relationships (encourage exploration) Balancing demands (help identifying demands)
Professional Member of the Team	Foster parents in this stage desire to have input but may not know what that means and will need guidance in how to interact and participate as a team member. They may need assistance overcoming fear of being included in the team with birth families. They may also feel they are the	Comprehensive info sharing/increased communication Input/engaged in decisions Regular case staffings Involvement in case planning

	<p>“expert” on the child after caring for the child for a short time and may need help balancing their role and respecting other’s expertise, including the parents.</p>	<p>(to some degree) Feedback about foster care program Exit surveys Disruption planning/processing Court hearings (with direction)</p>
<p>Resource Support</p>	<p>Foster parents may be underprepared for assessing their actual needs as foster parents and for the foster child. They may express frustration at lack of support but may not be able to articulate what they need. They often withhold communicating their needs, consciously or not, in order to present as if things are under control or avoid appearing uninformed.</p>	<p>Quality face-to-face contacts (more directive) Faster response time to phone calls Written info on benefits and reimbursements Opportunities for socialization</p>
<p>Crisis Needs</p>	<p>Foster parents in this stage may not be able to identify what a crisis is and what their role is in de-escalation. They are unsure about how to handle crisis and view this as the agency’s responsibility. How the crisis is handled by the foster parents and agency may impact whether the child is disrupted and whether the family continues fostering. Foster parents in this stage need increased support and step-by-step guidance and follow-up contacts. Assistance preparing for an eventual crisis is essential.</p>	<p>All suggestions under <u>Ways to Support Foster Parents (Crisis Needs)</u> apply</p>

The “Team Member” Parent		
AREA OF SUPPORT	DESCRIPTION OF CHALLENGES	PRIMARY STAGE-SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS
Foster Parent Development	Foster parents in this stage are not self-directed and are still reliant on specific guidance from the agency. Training is minimally recognized as a need, but foster parents will complete what is required to continue fostering. Their interactions with birth families are more positive but they are not comfortable engaging in more therapeutic ways, such as role modeling and emotional support. They are very invested in being “foster parents” and are viewed as compliant and cooperative. Agency focus on foster parent development should build on enhancing their understanding of roles and responsibilities, helping them to become more confident in their skills and abilities, and developing more skills for working with families.	Foundation Training Action planning/discussion integrated into training Responsibilities and Roles Professionalism Role Satisfaction Clear Expectations Communication Skills Skill development in working with birth families
Emotional Well-Being	Foster parents in this stage have had experience with caring for children, which may impact (positively or negatively) self-satisfaction and confidence in their abilities. Recognition for being “foster parents” is needed from outside of the agency (community, school, service providers, etc.). Foster parents need other forums to seek guidance, as agencies may assume that their experience translates to the need for less support. Foster parents may be questioning whether to continue fostering. They may be observing some negative impacts on family members but will likely need encouragement to discuss their needs and develop a plan of support.	Improved quality case manager contacts (skill directive, encouraging more initiative) Networking (geared toward guidance and problem-solving) Support Planning Mentor Recognition Burnout/Secondary Traumatic Stress (prevention/self-care)
Professional Member of the Team	Foster parents in this stage are focused on ultimately what is best for the child in the long-run. They need continued skill development and direction on being a part of the team and accomplishing objectives. They do not understand	Teaming Comprehensive info sharing/increased communication Input/engaged in decisions

	<p>the role of their own values in setting internal standards for children, birth parents, caseworkers, and other foster families.</p>	<p>Regular case staffings Involvement in case planning (to some degree) Feedback about foster care program Exit surveys Disruption planning/processing Court hearings (with direction)</p>
<p>Resource Support</p>	<p>Foster parents continue to be reliant on the agency to direct and arrange services. They may still need assistance assessing needs but will be compliant with recommended services and interventions. They may need to be told to initiate the service or intervention and will seek approval first.</p>	<p>Addressing barriers to services Quality face-to-face contacts (guide) Equipment to accommodate special needs Information (newsletters, training notices, resource lists) Opportunities for socialization</p>
<p>Crisis Needs</p>	<p>Foster parents will follow the Crisis Plans if they are established, but will not self-initiate and will seek approval of actions taken from multiple sources. They need several opportunities to process through crisis.</p>	<p>All suggestions under <u>Ways to Support Foster Parents (Crisis Needs)</u> apply</p>

The “Team Leader” Parent		
AREA OF SUPPORT	DESCRIPTION OF CHALLENGES	PRIMARY STAGE-SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS
Foster Parent Development	Foster parents at this stage have made a conscious decision to continue fostering. They are more participatory and begin to become more proactive as foster parents and in their caregiving of the child. Training becomes more meaningful and building their investment starts with active participation in developing an individualized training plan. They are focused on personal development, which provides a key opportunity for agencies to introduce self-evaluation tools and more advanced knowledge and skills.	<p>Foster Parents should assist in developing the Training Plan</p> <p>Self-evaluation</p> <p>Role satisfaction</p> <p>Mentally challenging work</p> <p>Communication skills (more advanced)</p> <p>Skill development in working with birth families (empowering)</p> <p>Understanding culture</p>
Emotional Well-Being	As stated above, these foster parents are evaluative and their self-identity may continue to center around being a foster parent. As they are starting to assume this new role, they will need different types of support. They are better able to evaluate the impact of fostering on family members. Support in this area becomes less directive, as foster parents can identify some of their own needs. Although positive feelings comes from being more skilled at caregiving, placing children with needs that exceed foster parent capabilities without additional support can undermine confidence and role satisfaction. Fulfillment comes from being a part of “something bigger” as well. Therefore, some foster parents will be seeking opportunities to help in other ways, but may also stretch themselves too thin.	<p>Improved quality case manager contacts (to monitor their initiative, keep them in the loop)</p> <p>Networking (w/experienced advocates to prepare to take on this role, w/new foster parents to serve as support and be encouragers)</p> <p>Mentor (possibly- may be specific to their role development)</p> <p>Community support and awareness</p> <p>Impact on relationships</p> <p>Respect</p> <p>Grief/Loss</p> <p>Understanding cultural beliefs and practices</p>
Professional Member of the Team	Foster parents in this stage can tend to “take charge” and need agency check-ins to monitor their initiative. Their self-direction and enthusiasm for their role may create a feeling of “stepping on the	<p>Treated as professionals</p> <p>Teaming</p> <p>Comprehensive information sharing/increased</p>

	<p>agency’s toes” or working too independently without really having the knowledge or authority to make decisions. It will be important for agencies to recognize and appreciate the foster parent’s steps toward self-sufficiency and continue to establish boundaries when needed. Foster parents will feel more confident sharing information in team settings and may become stronger in advocating for the child’s needs. Foster parents will be more attentive to lack of communication between parties, which may become a strong source of frustration.</p>	<p>communication Input/ engaged in decisions Mutual assessment Regular case staffings Involvement in case planning Conference calling if foster parents not available Feedback about foster care program Exit surveys Disruption planning/processing Court proceedings</p>
<p>Resource Support</p>	<p>Foster parents in this stage want to be kept “in the loop” about the foster care program, trainings, and community resources. They become more selective about service providers and use of resources based on quality and past experience, although they may generalize from a negative experience. As they are more apt to look at their own values and they are more receptive to culturally-specific resources and activities.</p>	<p>Increased community awareness (foster children focused) Culturally-specific resources Information (newsletters, training notices, resources lists) Opportunities for socialization</p>
<p>Crisis Needs</p>	<p>Foster parents will handle crisis on their own and will report back to the agency. They can begin to process how the crisis impacted all family members and talk through plans to resolve lingering issues, but may need guidance.</p>	<p>All suggestions under <u>Ways to Support Foster Parents (Crisis Needs)</u> apply</p>

The “Child Advocate” Parent		
AREA OF SUPPORT	DESCRIPTION OF CHALLENGES	PRIMARY STAGE-SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS
Foster Parent Development	<p>Foster parents in this stage tend to become more focused on the “system” and working to promote change. This could be directed at improving life for children in care, foster parents, or possibly birth parents or caseworkers, but may also include work toward changing community acceptance and understanding. Training foster parents should be aimed at developing advocacy skills and leadership within the foster parent group, coaching and mentoring, and training skills. Foster parents are willing to be utilized as an “expert” peer contact with new or struggling foster parents, or be involved in community education, but should have guidance and support in these roles.</p>	<p>Training should include knowledge and skills to develop self-support and effective advocacy</p> <p>Self-evaluation</p> <p>Professionalism</p> <p>New foster parent orientation/support (as co-trainer)</p> <p>Involvement in retention efforts</p> <p>Role satisfaction (in new role)</p> <p>Co-training</p> <p>Mentally challenging work (and training)</p> <p>Communication skills</p> <p>Understanding culture</p>
Emotional Well-Being	<p>Foster parents may continue to extend themselves in several directions, and may stop accepting children for placement to focus on other roles. Foster parents will need to be recognized for the contributions they can make to the system despite not having children in their home, so as not to lose their expertise. If the agency does not align with their thinking or branching out to different roles, the foster parents may quit, retire, or seek another agency to be licensed with. They may need “check-ins” to gauge how they are balancing different roles as a preventive measure. Families may exit the system if there is discord between family member roles and needs. Agencies should not underestimate the need for continued reassurance and recognition, as these parents may be caring for children with the most challenging needs because</p>	<p>Improved quality case manager contacts (may need to guide in this role)</p> <p>Networking (helping to lead networking effort, becoming the “go to” foster parents)</p> <p>Mentor (to Team Leader parents, helping to coordinate/coordinating, mentor coaching)</p> <p>Recognition (community)</p> <p>Balancing demands</p> <p>Understanding cultural beliefs and practices</p>

	<p>the agencies high degree of confidence in their abilities.</p>	
<p>Professional Member of the Team</p>	<p>Foster parents expect to be an integral part of the child’s team. Foster parents in this stage can become stuck in what they believe needs to happen for the child and the family. They may have so much experience that they need to be reminded that each child has unique needs that need to be assessed within the context of their family. They are skilled participants in planning for the child’s needs, which may make them the desired foster parents for all children, particularly to newer workers. They often are self-sufficient to the point of neglecting to communicate updates to the worker in a timely manner; therefore, expectations should be clear.</p>	<p>Treated as professionals Teaming Comprehensive information sharing/increased communication Input/ engaged in decisions Mutual assessment Regular case staffings Involvement in case planning Conference calling if foster parents not available Feedback about foster care program Exit surveys Disruption planning/processing Involved in Training planning Court proceedings</p>
<p>Resource Support</p>	<p>Foster parents want to work toward the inequities in service provision or lack of adequate or culturally-specific resources. They are likely to give more of themselves to ensure better services to the child that will have positive, life-long outcomes instead of immediate fixes. They also may strive for increased support and resources to foster families. They may need direction in channeling these efforts toward those that hold the power to create change.</p>	<p>Increased community awareness (system-focused) Culturally-specific resources Information (newsletters, training notices, resources lists) Opportunities for socialization</p>
<p>Crisis Needs</p>	<p>While self-sufficient in dealing with crisis, agencies should not make assumptions about their ability to handle them on their own. They may need to process when the system fails.</p>	<p>All suggestions under <u>Ways to Support Foster Parents (Crisis Needs)</u> apply</p>

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