You have learned in previous modules about the general role of a Coordinator in caring out licensing agency’s responsibilities. Now, you’ll learn more about your role in understanding and supporting foster families through topics such as the stages foster families go through as they foster, what resources are available to families, the purpose of support plans, and how to engage foster families. You’ll be given information on how to discuss different topics with foster families, such as confidentiality, boundaries, child abuse and neglect, and their motivation to foster.
Upon completion of this module, participants should have the knowledge and skills to:

- Explain the different stages and qualities of foster parenting.
- Describe the motivation that prompts people to become foster parents.
- Describe the importance and impact of engaging the foster family.
- Outline the requirements for Foster Parents regarding:
  - confidentiality,
  - boundaries,
  - disclosure or reporting requirements,
  - support during child abuse & neglect allegations.
Let’s hear these Coordinators speak about their favorite or most challenging part of working with foster families. Click each person to hear more.

**Dean:**
>> My favorite part about working with foster families is feeling that I have helped them get through something, helped them manage a crisis, helped support them in some way. The bottom line is the most rewarding aspect of this job is when a foster parent feels they’ve accomplished something, you’ve helped them get through a crisis and they feel good about the care they’re providing for the children and you see that connection developing between the foster parent and the foster children.

**Mike:**
>> My favorite part of working with foster families is their enthusiasm, especially when they first start, they have a passion for helping children and they want to put that into action. I think the most challenging piece of working with foster parents would be the fact that everybody’s working with some limited resources, especially foster families; they don’t have enough time, enough money.

**Dawn:**
>> I think my favorite part is seeing people that do this because they really, really care about kids, care about families and want to give back. I’m like, wow, you really are in this for the right
reason. Challenging pieces are, man if something goes wrong in your foster home or if a child ends up being hurt, it's, it's really hard because I wonder if I missed something along the way that I should have known that something would happen, or I should have picked up on something in my assessments. So it's really, I, I take it very personally -- if something does go wrong and a child's compromised and I think that is hard because our foster parents are people and things happen, some are within their control and some aren't. And so I think that's, that's really tough to see some of the tough things that people have gone through and still manage to be in foster care.

**Patty:**
>> I have always enjoyed watching foster families grow and develop as a foster family. They come into the program with certain hopes and expectations and to just watch them learn and develop, working with their strengths, that's always been the most enjoyable thing about it. Of course one of the most challenging pieces is helping the families with some of those struggles that they're having, with maybe some of the behaviors that are, are going on with the kids in their home, or one of the worst is when the children have to leave home, some of the grief that is going on with the foster homes can be really difficult to work with.

**Grace:**
>> I think the favorite part is watching foster families grow; they grow in maturity, intelligence, in the ability to deal with social issues. What I see as the most challenging is when they are struggling with a concept, a new idea, a new rule and they want to do it correctly, but they're having difficulty getting to the point of doing it well. The other challenging part is when they have done something wrong and it's the conversation with them that they understand that what they did was not appropriate, they're still good people and they still will do a good job for the agency in taking care of the child, but we need to do a little tweaking on how they're reacting to some situations.
You just heard many perspectives on the joys and challenges of working with foster families. You may be wondering what you can do to support foster families as they grow. Let’s start by exploring a framework for support.
A wide array of research exists on foster parents’ need for support. The six qualities shown here are a way to define “support” from the perspective of the foster parents and draw together the components that contribute to a positive sense of support. These components are organized into six categories, or themes, that together create an ideal framework for the provision of support.

Let’s look at each quality and see helpful areas to focus on with foster parents.

**Foster Parent Development** includes the knowledge and skills that promote successful functioning in the foster parent role.
- Training
- Manuals / Policies
- Responsibilities and Roles
- Self-evaluation
- Professionalism
- New foster parent orientation/support
- Involvement in retention efforts
- Role satisfaction
- Clear expectations
- Co-Training
- Mentally challenging work
• Communication skills
• Skill development in working with birth families
• Understanding Culture

**Emotional Well-Being** encompasses aspects that build capacity to alleviate distress, frustration, and loss relevant to the demands of foster parenting.
• Increased/improved quality case manager contacts
• Networking
• Mentoring
• Respite and relief
• Support planning
• Recognition (agency and community)
• Community awareness and support
• Burnout/secondary traumatic stress
• 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

**Professional Member of the Team** is the promotion of foster parent participation and successful teamwork.
• 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

**Resource Support** includes the provision of adequate knowledge, skills, and services to care for foster children and maintain connections to other foster parents.
• 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
• Transportation
• Childcare
• Culturally specific resources
• Information (newsletters, training notices, resources lists)
• Opportunities for socialization

**Crisis Needs** target tangible and intangible resources to reinforce foster parents’ abilities to manage crisis and emergency placements.

• Increased caseworker support at placement
• Formal, child-specific crisis plan
• Funding to cover unplanned costs and supplies for emergencies
• Crisis support system (24 hours/ phone)
• Respite and Relief
• Opportunity to process disruptions and requests for removal
• Allegations of CAN
• Help in dealing with difficult behaviors and special needs
• Preparation and support for transitions (understanding their role)

**Financial Support** refers to how foster parents are reimbursed for the costs incurred in caring for children who are placed with them. Financial support is covered more in depth in Module 5.

• Adequate services
• Adequate rates and reimbursements
• Funding for supplies
• Community support (financial and provision of services)
• System of “Equitable Rewards”
• Paid respite/daycare as relief
The developmental functioning of a foster parent 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.

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 is licensed, they may be perfectly content in their current stage and stay there throughout their time fostering. 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.

Let’s take a look at the continuum of developmental stages.

**The “Room for One More” Parent:** In this stage, foster parents need intense guidance and direction; they may not see the benefits.

**The “Team Member” Parent:** Foster parents in this stage are not self-directed and are still reliant on specific guidance from the agency.

**The “Team Leader” Parent:** 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.

**The “Child Advocate” Parent:** Foster parents in this stage tend to become more focused on the “system” and working to promote change.
You just heard about the four stages of foster parenting. Here’s a link to a handout on how the six qualities of support are impacted by the developmental stage of the foster parent. It will be useful to reference during this next section. ([http://www.wcwpds.wisc.edu/related-training/fcc/m3/docs/FCC-m3-Guide-Supporting-Families.pdf](http://www.wcwpds.wisc.edu/related-training/fcc/m3/docs/FCC-m3-Guide-Supporting-Families.pdf))

Please note that the information provided about foster parents in each stage is meant to inform your work with them and not meant as a judgment on their progress as foster parents. Foster parents will move between these stages often and may not display every characteristic described here.
It is important to consider the six qualities of support based on a foster parents’ developmental stage and be able to meet the challenges faced by each foster parent in each area.

Now, let’s see some examples of how to support foster parents depending on their current stage.

**FOSTER PARENT DEVELOPMENT**

**“Room for One More” Foster Parents** need intense guidance and direction, but often fail to 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 be on increasing understanding of foster parenting and building basic skills.

**“Team Member” foster parents** 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.

“Team Leader” Foster Parents 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.

“Child Advocate” Foster Parents 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. It 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.
EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

“Room for One More” Foster Parents 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 lack of self-confidence in skills and lack of experience. They are often willing to take on more than they can handle, which can put children at risk of disruption. Once placement occurs, they are reliant on the 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.

“Team Member” Foster Parents have had experience with caring for children, which may either positively or negatively impact self-satisfaction and confidence in their abilities. Recognition for being foster parents is needed from outside of the agency, from the 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.

“Team Leader” 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 come 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.

“Child Advocate” 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 agencies to be licensed with. As a preventive measure, they may need check-ins to gauge how they are balancing different roles. 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 of the agencies high degree of confidence in their abilities.
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER OF THE TEAM

“Room for One More” Foster Parents 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 their fear of being included in the team with birth families. They may also feel they are the 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.

“Team Member” Foster Parents focus on 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 the role of their own values in setting internal standards for children, birth parents, social workers, and other foster families.

“Team Leader” Foster Parents may 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 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.
“Child Advocate” 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.
RESOURCE SUPPORT
“Room for One More” Foster Parents may be underprepared for assessing their actual needs as foster parents and the needs of 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 to avoid appearing uninformed.

“Team Member” 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.

“Team Leader” Foster Parents 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 experiences; they may generalize from a negative experience. They are more apt to look at their own values and are more receptive to culturally-specific resources and activities.

“Child Advocate” 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 that will have positive, life-long outcomes for a child 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.
CRISIS NEEDS

“Room for One More” Foster Parents 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, step-by-step guidance, follow-up contacts, and assistance preparing for an eventual crisis is essential.

“Team Member” Foster Parents 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.

“Team Leader” 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.

“Child Advocate” Foster Parents will be self-sufficient in dealing with crisis, but agencies should not make assumptions about their ability to handle them on their own. They may need to process when the system fails.
Despite the developmental stage a foster parent 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, where individuals may shift around to any of the stages of denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and resolution as they work through the grief process, foster families will reposition around the developmental stages as well. They will need a 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 a family’s needs.

Here are some events that may trigger a shift:
- new child placed
- foster child leaving the home
- allegation of maltreatment
- system challenges (worker or court)
- difficulty managing child’s behavior
- lack of support from extended family
- change in case manager/service provider
- opportunity to provide community education
- family crisis
- negative relationship with birth family
- positive growth in relationship with birth family
- successful transition to independent living
Supporting Foster Families

In this scenario, you’ll meet the Smith family as they start fostering. As they transition over time, you’ll identify in which developmental stage the family appears to be. You may want to reference the corresponding handout, the Guide to Supporting Foster Families, and consider ways in which you could be showing them support.

Meet Aaron & Jane Smith

Aaron and Jane Smith have been foster parents for eight months; they were encouraged to foster by Aaron's brother and sister-in-law, who have fostered for many years. Shortly after becoming licensed, they welcomed 6-month-old Sydney into their home, and in their words, "immediately fell in love with her." They have told you, their licensor, that they know how much she's been through in her short life, but they're confident that with their love and support, "she’ll be just fine."

When they were newly licensed, the Smiths struggled to let you and the team members know what they needed to best support Sydney, and they often expressed frustration at the lack of support they felt they received.

In which stage of foster parenting do the Smiths appear to be?
Room for One More | Team Member | Team Leader | Child Advocate

18 Months Pass...

Sydney was reunified with her mother. Aaron and Jane expressed sadness in her leaving, but they seem to understand that the goal is to reunify children with their families when it is
appropriate. They have told the team members that they understand that reunifying with her mother was in Sydney's best interest, but they struggled to provide any emotional support to Sydney's mother during the transition.

**In which stage of foster parenting do the Smiths appear to be?**
Room for One More  |  Team Member  |  Team Leader  |  Child Advocate

**Three Years Pass**
Jane gave birth to their first child, Isaac. Shortly after Isaac was born, Aaron and Jane were approached to consider accepting 2-year-old Jack into their home. They quickly agreed to have Jack placed with them, and you expressed concerns regarding the impact of having a toddler placed in their home so soon after the birth of their son. Aaron and Jane told you that they had an immediate connection with Jack and figured that they could provide adequate care to both him and Isaac. They were initially resistant to discuss the impact of fostering Jack so soon after Isaac's birth. Eventually, they reconsidered and decided not to accept Jack into their home.

**In which stage of foster parenting do the Smiths appear to be?**
Room for One More  |  Team Member  |  Team Leader  |  Child Advocate

**Seven Months Later**
Aaron and Jane accepted placement of Ethan, a six-year-old. Three months after Ethan was placed with the Smiths, Aaron's brother passed away suddenly. Aaron and Jane contacted you and let you know that, given the tragedy in the family, they were requesting several days of respite for Ethan so that they could spend time with their family and mourn their loss. They knew that they both needed time to grieve and were concerned about the impact of the loss on their family and on Ethan. They planned to process the loss with Ethan as well, as he had become close to Aaron's brother.

**In which stage of foster parenting do the Smiths appear to be?**
Room for One More  |  Team Member  |  Team Leader  |  Child Advocate

**Seven Years Pass**
Aaron and Jane have taken on a leadership role among their peers. They lead a monthly support group out of their home to process issues that arise for foster parents licensed by your agency. They reach out to new foster parents to help them adjust to life as a foster family, and often voice their opinions to you about ways that the foster care program could be improved.

**In which stage of foster parenting do the Smiths appear to be?**
Room for One More  |  Team Member  |  Team Leader  |  Child Advocate
As you determine the most appropriate ways in which to support your foster families, you’ll need to consider what led them to fostering.

If it was their desire to help others, their faith, their loyalty or dedication to families, you’ll need to integrate this into the ways in which you support that family. This will be different for every foster family. It may also be different for members of the same foster family, so your approach to cultivate this motivation will need to be adapted. This will be an important conversation to have with your families as you proceed through licensing. What led them to foster? How did their family decide to foster?

You will also work with foster parents who are related to the children in their care. It’s easy to assume that relative caregivers foster to help out their family members, but it will be important for you to explore this with relative caregivers and to incorporate this into the support you offer.

As you consider the conversations that you’ll have with your foster families, please listen to two veteran foster parents as they describe their motivation to foster.
Voices of foster parents:

>> What made us decide to foster was the need for the children out there. We saw that there was a need to be able to take children in your home and be able to love and care for them like your own until their parents could get them back. So I think it was a compilation my husband and I talking about it and part of it was our faith, and that's why we did.

>> It really was a process for us. After we made the initial contact with our agency and began the foster parent paperwork and the interviews with our coordinator, we put the paperwork aside and gave it a lot of thought and tried to discern whether or not it was the best decision for our family and quite a bit of time passed before we finally made the commitment as a family and picked up the phone and called the coordinator and said, you know what? We're ready to sign on the dotted line and what was interesting is our coordinator had shared with us that he'd thought we had decided not to foster and while we greatly appreciated the space and time he gave us as made the decision, at the same time, our decision may be made, been made a little bit sooner had he picked up the phone and called us first and just asked us where we were in the process. But it, it was something that we thought about, gave time to and realized it was a good decision for our family at that point in time and till this day, have no regrets.
As you license foster families, you will also license relative caregivers. There has been an increase in the number of relative caregivers in recent years, and it is important to understand the unique motivation that drives relative caregivers, as well as unique challenges they face, so you can support them.

While both related and non-related caregivers are motivated to help the children in their care, the motivation that drives relatives may differ from that of non-related caregivers. Non-related caregivers are often driven to foster based on a desire to help children and families and to give back to their community. Their motivation is generally more global, while relative caregivers are often motivated by a drive to assist their own family. Relative caregivers may be motivated by:

**Loyalty:** Wanting to keep the child within the family and out of foster care.

**Obligation:** Feeling of responsibility for the child and that someone in the family needs to help out.

**Rescue:** Wanting to save the child from entering foster care and keep them safe within the family.

**Love:** Many family members volunteer to care for the child out of the love they feel for their children or grandchildren.

**Anger:** Anger toward the child’s parents about the situation that led the child to be placed into foster care.

**Resources:** Sometimes relatives have more resources or financial support than the child’s parents.
As you assess the motivation of a relative caregiver, consider the following questions:

Can the relative caregiver avoid transferring their emotions regarding the child’s parents onto the child?
  • *Can they keep their emotions, such as frustration or anger, in check if they are upset with the child’s parents?*
  • *How will they handle those strong emotions?*

Can the relative caregiver recognize their motivation to foster, and appropriately address and monitor their motivation?
  • *What is their motivation to foster?*
  • *How do they feel about fostering this child?*
  • *How can they manage their feelings?*
  • *What support systems do they have in place?*
You will need to process with relative caregivers to find out what motivates them to care for the child and how they will manage the stress of fostering, including changing roles in their family.

As relatives become foster parents, their role in their family dramatically changes. They go from being a relative of the child to taking on a parental role. Relative caregivers must negotiate their changing role in their family with relation to the child and to the child’s parent. The change in role will affect the rest of the family as well, and this new role can be difficult for relative caregivers to manage at times. The caregiver is not the only member of the family whose role will change; the child and the child’s parent will also have new roles based on this change in family structure.

Consider the following example: imagine that you are the grandmother of a young boy who is going to be placed into foster care. You have stepped forward to care for your grandson and are beginning the licensing process.

If you are caring for your daughter’s son, watch and see how the roles and relationships may change while your grandson is in your home. When you are caring for your grandson as a foster parent, you must put his needs first, and he literally moves up to the level of his mom and uncle. He becomes your primary responsibility, so your role with him becomes that of a parent more so than a grandparent. Think about how this might change the relationships between you
and your grandson, your children, and your other grandchildren, as well as how the relationships will change between your grandson and you, his mom, his uncle, and his cousins.

This change in roles can create a sense of loss for everyone and may be confusing at times. Your grandson may come to see you as more of a parent, and your other grandchildren may be confused at why they have a different relationship with you than their cousin does. Your daughter and son may be frustrated because your grandson now must be your priority, while in the past your priority may have been them. You might feel some guilt that now your grandson will be the priority before your children, and this is to be expected. You might even feel some embarrassment that your family is involved in the child welfare system and that you’ll have to disclose some negative information about your daughter.

As a coordinator working with relative caregivers, you will need to assist them and the family to process their changing roles, regardless of their original status in the family (whether they are siblings, grandparents, aunts, or uncles).
Now that we’ve looked at stages of foster care and the motivation to foster, let’s consider the importance of engaging families.

When we think about children in out-of-home care, we often think about engaging the children and engaging birth families, but often the idea of engaging foster families is overlooked. The assumption sometimes is that foster families have volunteered to foster and are well-trained, so they are already engaged in the process of fostering. It is easy to think that foster families are prepared and there isn’t a need to reach out and engage them. You may even assume that you have a relationship with them because you’ve worked with them so much. But failing to engage and support your foster families will result in failing to retain them. Think back to what you learned about recruiting and retaining foster families – those techniques are not simply to bring families into your agency, but also to keep them involved and supported as they foster. Remember, you learned earlier that the main reason families stop fostering is because they feel unsupported. And, in this module, you’ve also learned various strategies for supporting and engaging families at different stages.
Despite the support provided or available, families may still need specific plans to assist them in caring for children.

As the Foster Care Coordinator, you will be responsible for creating and maintaining support plans for your foster families. DCF has a form, called an Out-of-Home Care Support Plan (https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/forms/doc/cfs2131.docx), that is used for general support and services provided to foster families.

This plan identifies:
- Placement preferences.
- Strengths in terms of skills, education, resources, and support.
- Areas that need support or an increase in skill development, and how those needs affect the functioning of the foster family.
- The support network.
- The services offered to the foster family.

In addition to the Out-of-Home Care Support Plan, the Confirming Safe Environments section of the child’s Permanency Plan outlines the services and support offered to a foster family to support the placement of a specific child in the foster home.

Other plans that can be put into place include Corrective Action Plans, which document changes that need to be made in a foster home based on identified licensing concerns.
Let’s switch gears now, and listen to some voices of experience share what they think is the best way to support foster families.

**Dean**

>> I think the best way to support foster families is be there for them when they call and it's really important that you keep your regular contacts with them and you try to be on time. If you say you're coming at 4 o'clock, be there at 4 o'clock; don't show up at 4:30. And if you're going to be late or stuck in traffic, you give them a call and we're available to our foster parents 24/7, so if they're having a crisis or issue at 11 o'clock at night, they can call us or call our answering service and we're going to give them the support they need. Keeping involved with foster parents, regularly, communicating with them and providing them with some good, quality, continuing education and support groups really does support them. At this point, what happens between the agency and the foster parent is a trusting relationship. If you've got that trusting relationship, the placement is going to go much smoother, you're going to retain your foster parents and there's going to be less disruptions in placements.

**Mike**

>> I think the best way to support foster families is to be sure that they have the resources that they need. I also think it’s important that, that they have a, a voice in the children that they're going to be taking into their homes, and to give them all the information that they're going to need to take care of the child properly.
Dawn
>> The best way, I believe, is to make sure they're getting training, that you are encouraging them to learn new skills all the time, I don't care how long they have been a foster parent, their experience alone is not going to carry them through, by being honest, by having contact with them, by returning phone calls. A lot of times it's much easier for me to return a phone call then the family's worker, or I can get information to them. So I think if they feel they're being heard and being made a part of a team is the best way that we can support foster families. They're not always going to have a positive experience, but if we can help them learn and grow, where people start is not where they're going to end up and we just need to have faith that people can, can learn new skills and change and learn from every single placement that comes in.

Patty
>> I hear a lot of foster families talk a lot about it's nice to have the banquets the picnics and some of the gifts that agencies provide for them, but that's not what keeps them around. Really what they say the best way to support them is to listen to them, answer their phone calls, just be there for them. You don't always have to have the answer, it's just important to be there and to listen to them when they're having struggles, or to just sit and help them figure things out together.

Grace
>> The best way to support our foster families is to listen to them. There are times when they are feeling frustrated with the situation and they need to vent to someone and they tend to call the coordinator to vent. They've learned that if they call and talk to me, I listen to what they have to say and then say, is this something we can work through, And most of the times, they'll say, I just wanted someone to listen to me.

They also appreciate when our agency sends them birthday cards or Christmas cards and we try to send out other notices through the years for like Valentine's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, those types of things. One of the other things that the foster parents have really appreciated is when our agency sends a graduation card to their biological children when they graduate from high school. And I like to send a card to the child that's graduating and inside the card, write a thank you to the child for sharing their home, their parents, their toys, their life with the children of the community.
Voices of foster parents:

>> When we were struggling and having a hard time it was really important to connect with other people doing what we did, often times your family and your friends don’t understand what you’re going through when you’re fostering so it's really important to connect with people that have the same mindset that you do and that can give you good ideas, you know often times they have the best ideas because they've been through it already.

>> For me I'm fairly religious and I take some time and I pray. I talk to my friends. I think most of the same things that other people do when they're stressed out.

>> I think it's incredibly helpful having a team supporting the kids from the social workers being involved, being able to call a social worker and just vent for no reason other than to vent. I find time alone is helpful so getting the kids a baby sitter and getting away from the house for a little while can really, really be helpful.
We just finished talking about support and engaging families. There are a few more topics to cover with foster parents in your role as coordinator. Let’s turn first to the importance of confidentiality.

While you have a responsibility within your agency to maintain the confidentiality of the children and families with whom you work, you also have a responsibility to explain to your foster families the importance of confidentiality and the need for them to maintain confidentiality. Foster parents learn about the importance of confidentiality in training, but it is important to regularly revisit the significance of maintaining the confidentiality of children and families.

Foster parents must respect the confidentiality of foster children and their families by sharing details about the child or family ONLY with those who need to know the information and who have been authorized to receive it. In order for a person to be authorized to receive the information, the child’s parent must have signed a consent form giving that person authorization to communicate about their child. It is important to provide reminders that this means that foster parents cannot share information about the child or their family with friends, neighbors, or relatives without authorization. Foster parents are taught in training that maintaining the confidentiality of others is a powerful way to show support and respect for their privacy.
You may be responsible for assisting foster parents to get signed authorizations and consents for the children placed in their homes; and, your foster families are likely to have questions regarding confidentiality and the sharing of information.

It can be easy to imagine that sharing some details or a story about a child or the child’s family can be “harmless”; and while it may not be done maliciously, the impact can be devastating.

To understand the impact of respecting or disregarding the confidentiality of foster children, please listen to some examples given by former foster youth about how their confidentiality was violated while they were in care.

“My foster mom told me one day, ‘Your bio-mother sent you a letter, so I opened it and this is what she had to say.‘”

“My foster mom told me, ‘I read your diary. I didn’t know you hate this place; you shouldn’t leave it in the open for me to read.’”

“I was at the store with my foster dad. A friend of my foster dad’s came up to me and asked who I was, and my foster dad said, ‘This is my foster son, Johnny.’ His friend said, ‘Ohhh you’re Johnny! I’ve heard all about you!’”

Think for a moment about how these children must have felt. Think about how you would feel if you were in one of these situations. Foster parents hear these same examples in their Pre-Placement training, and you are encouraged to process these situations with them.
Follow these links for resources that will assist you in discussing confidentiality with foster parents.


(See Chapter 2 on confidentiality)
Here are some situations that foster parents might encounter. It’s important for you to prepare them before they’re caught off-guard. Foster parents have completed a similar activity in their Pre-Placement training.

The reality that foster parents face is that their friends and family will likely know that they are foster parents, and will be curious about the children in their care. They may also be approached by others in the community wanting to know about the children in their home. It is important to plan how foster families will respond to these situations ahead of time to avoid awkward or embarrassing situations.

Read the following scenarios and think about how foster parents might handle these situations.

**How can they best respond without violating the children’s confidentiality?**

**Your job:** Make note of how you would encourage your foster parents to respond.  
*What would you tell them?*  
Discuss your ideas with your supervisor

*(Note: The remainder of this activity contains no audio.)*

**Scenario 1**
A foster parent takes their foster children to register for school.

One of the school staff looks up to see the family walking in with multiple children and in a shocked voice says, “Are these all foster kids?!"

**How might the foster parent respond?**

**One idea:** The foster parent might say, “These children all live in my home and need to be registered for school.”

**Scenario 2**

A foster parent takes their birth children, their foster children, and some of the children’s friends to a local museum.

Admission to this museum is expensive, and the foster parent is aware that this museum offers free admission for children in foster care.

**What could the foster parent do?**

**One idea:** Get a family pass to the museum to avoid breaching confidentiality -- or ask for the state issued FP ID card.

**Scenario 3**

A foster child damages property in their foster home to the extent that the police must be called.

After the police leave, a neighbor comes over and asks the foster parent what happened.

**How does the foster parent respond?**

**One idea:** The foster parent could tell the neighbor that they can’t discuss the incident.

**Conclusion**

*What were some of your ideas?*

Talk with your supervisor about how foster parents could best respond in these kinds of situations.

**One idea:** Foster parents could tell people "it's not my story to tell" when asked specifics about the children.
In addition to discussing confidentiality, it will be vital for you to talk with foster families about the importance of setting appropriate boundaries in their homes. They will be working with children from varied backgrounds with many different histories, and will need to take certain precautions to create consistent boundaries and rules in order to keep all household members safe. Setting appropriate boundaries can include but are not limited to:

• Modifying house rules to provide a safe and comfortable environment, including always being clothed in common areas of your home and restricting the parents’ bedroom to parents only. (http://wifostercareandadoption.org/Portals/fcarc/TipSheets/CaringChildrenYouth/HouseholdRules.pdf)

• Providing a level of supervision appropriate for each child – this will likely be different for different children.

• Not leaving a child who has been sexually abused alone with anyone of the same gender of the abuser.

• It is essential that foster families understand the importance of consistency as they foster. This includes consistency in boundaries between family members and foster children and consistency in providing discipline.
In Module 2 you learned about a foster parent’s responsibility to report concerns that a foster child has been abused or neglected or threatened with abuse and neglect. As the Coordinator, you will be responsible for sharing this information with foster parents, and you will likely be the person they will call to report abuse or neglect, to respond to questions they may have about what a child has said to them, or when they find themselves facing an allegation.

Foster parents must also be prepared for the children in their care to disclose past abuse. They will need to understand that it will take a great deal of courage for the children to disclose this. It will also probably be a difficult conversation for the foster parents to have, but foster parents must be able and willing to engage with the child on their level. The next slide provides useful information to share with foster parents in order to make this conversation more comfortable for both the foster parents and the child. This can also be found in the Foster Parent Pre-Placement training. It is very important for foster parents to not solicit this information from a child unless the child approaches their foster parents about it.

The next slide will give you some ideas on how to help foster parents have these difficult conversations.
Here is how you can frame the conversation with foster parents:

If a child has been abused or neglected or is currently being maltreated, it will take a great deal of courage for them to tell you. It will also probably be a difficult conversation for you to have. You must be able and willing to engage with the child on their level. Please listen to these ideas to help this conversation be more comfortable for you and the child. Do not solicit this information from a child unless they approach you about it.

- Find a safe and quiet place to talk and put yourself at eye level with the child (but also understand that they may not be able to make eye contact with you during this conversation).
- Listen without judging and choose your words carefully. Do not interrogate or coach the child! You are not investigating the situation, so just listen.
- The child will probably feel some shame or embarrassment, and will need to feel safe and be able to tell you their story in their own words.
- Be honest about the responsibility that you have to share this information with someone who can help. **Do not** tell the child that you won’t tell anyone. You are required to share this information.
- You will probably have strong reactions to their story. Try to remain calm and not show the child your reactions, especially disgust, fear, or anger, as the child may interpret this to mean that you are disgusted or angry with them. Be clear with the child that you care for them.
- Support the child in telling you their story, thank them for telling you, and let them know that they are safe.
- Let the child know that this was not their fault. Children will often blame themselves.
- Outline what steps you’ll need to take to share this information, and explain that you’ll be sharing with someone who can help.
Did you know? Foster parents are reported for allegations of child abuse and neglect at a higher frequency than the general public; however, the substantiation rates for the general public are higher than those for foster parents.

Licensing agencies and tribes have a responsibility to ensure that foster parents are providing a safe environment, and they must assess any allegations of abuse and neglect of the children in foster care.

Foster parents are encouraged to speak with their licensing worker to learn what the agency will do if an allegation is made against someone in their home. The agency assessing the allegation should give the foster parent information about appeal rights if they are substantiated for abuse or neglect.

There is no guaranteed method for avoiding allegations, but there are ways to minimize risk. The next slide will explain some of these preventative strategies and you should discuss these with foster families during the licensing process.
Suggestions for Minimizing the Risk of an Allegation

To minimize the risk of an allegation, there are things that foster parents can do prior to accepting a child for placement and once the child is placed in their home.

Click the first button to learn about strategies to use before placement.
Suggestions for Minimizing Allegation Risk Before Placement

Before placement foster parents can:

Find out as much as possible about the child’s history of abuse or neglect (both at home and in previous placements).
Ask the caseworker if the child has a history of making allegations.
Only accept placements of children they can adequately care for.
During a child’s placement foster parents can:

- Work with the child’s team to ensure that the child’s needs are identified and sufficiently met.
- Follow all foster care laws, licensing rules, and policies.
- Create house rules and ensure that all household members follow them.
- Keep a record of the child’s behaviors, interactions, school issues, medical appointments, discussions with other professionals or team members, especially behaviors, comments, or interactions that seem unusual or out of the ordinary for that child.
- Promptly report any unusual incident or injury.
- Work as a member of the child’s team in a professional manner, and
- Attend training to learn about caring for children who have been abused or neglected.
In addition to the considerations just discussed, the following precautions should be taken by foster parents when fostering children who have been impacted by sexual abuse. It is important to recognize that any child coming into foster care may have been sexually abused, and that some of these children have not yet disclosed this abuse. Children who have been sexually abused will need patience, flexibility, support, additional supervision, and may disclose information about their abuse to foster parents. You need to explain to foster parents that children who are placed with them may have sexual knowledge and experiences far beyond what is normal for children their age, and the foster parents will need to be comfortable discussing sex and sexual abuse without becoming upset, judgmental, or insecure.
Possible precautions foster families should consider when fostering children impacted by sexual abuse include:

- Modifying house rules to provide a safe and comfortable environment, including always being clothed in common areas of the home and restricting the parents’ bedroom to parents only.

- Providing a high level of supervision, as some children who have been sexually abused develop sexualized behaviors. Know what the risk management plan is and what the supervision expectations are.

- Do not leave a child who has been sexually abused alone with anyone of the same gender of the abuser.

- Working with the birth family and maintaining a respectful and empathetic relationship. This can be difficult if members of the birth family contributed to the abuse. Foster parents should be encouraged to talk with you, the licensing worker or the child’s caseworker if they have concerns about maintaining a positive relationship with the child’s family.

- Foster parents should be encouraged to talk about their feelings with the licensing worker or the child’s caseworker so that their feelings do not interfere with interactions with the child.
Undergoing an allegation of abuse and neglect is an emotional and challenging process. Many foster families struggle with feeling unsupported when an allegation is made. When allegations are made, the case is turned over to another county to determine if an initial assessment is necessary. If an initial assessment is warranted, the other county will conduct an independent investigation. If a foster parent is the subject of an initial assessment, having support from other foster parents who have experienced allegations will be incredibly beneficial.

The Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, Inc. (called “WFAPA”), is a statewide support association for foster and adoptive parents. WFAPA has a program called Foster and Adoptive Support and Preservation Program (called “FASPP”), which is a collection of phone numbers for foster and adoptive parents to call when they are experiencing allegations of abuse and neglect. Please visit WFAPA’s website (www wfapa org) for more information on accessing the support of other foster parents.
Consider the following suggestions for helping foster families through the initial assessment process. There are additional tips in the Foster Parent Handbook.

Foster families should be encouraged to:
Maintain a professional attitude.
Ask for help in understanding the assessment and investigation process.
Document conversations or meetings and ask for copies of all of the documents.
Read documentation carefully and ask questions.
Connect with local foster parent support groups for support and guidance.
Maintain family’s routine; do not isolate from loved ones.
Consider that one of your foster families is dealing with allegations of abuse in their home. In what way can you support them as they go through this process?

A - I can't do anything! I'm not supposed to talk to them about the allegations!

B - Provide resources regarding support offered to foster parents.

C - Talk to them about the allegations - I want them to know that I'm here for them.
In this module, you learned about your role in working with foster families and the importance of engaging and supporting based on their developmental stage and their motivation to foster. You’ve learned about your responsibility to prepare foster families regarding confidentiality, setting boundaries, disclosure and reporting requirements, and managing allegations.

In the next module, we’ll step through sections of DCF 56 and the licensing process.
Thank you for completing Module 3: Role with Families.
When you’re ready, continue on to the next module:
Module 4: Licensing Process