

While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS SEPTEMBER 2002

The Adoption and Foster Care Process

Congratulations! You recently decided to begin the process of opening your home and heart to a child, and this is an exciting time for you. Of course, it can also be difficult to work through the foster care or adoption systems, because both systems include many steps—each with specific guidelines, rules, and timelines. The work involved from initial call to the placement of a child can take months or even more than a year, and waiting can be hard.



Overcoming Hurdles during the Foster Care and Adoption Process

Although thinking about adopting or fostering a child is exciting and heartwarming, the process of becoming a foster or adoptive parent can be daunting. The chart at the right lists the basic steps in the process, plus some of the challenges parents may face and coping strategies collected from experienced foster and adoptive parents.

The steps and strategies are general—specific rules and timelines will vary depending



on your county or agency. We hope these tips from people who have been through the process will help you stay positive while you wait to welcome a child into your life.

Differences between the adoption and foster care process are noted in the chart, but because the two processes are more similar than different, we chose to combine them. Today adults are recruited to be foster, adoptive, and resource parents. Resource parents are foster parents who offer support to help reunite children with their birth parents, but also commit to the possibility of adopting the children if reunification is not possible.

Steps for Prospective Foster & Adoptive Parents

<i>Steps</i>	<i>County/Agency Role</i>
<p>1. Make Your First Call You call your county or private agency to inquire about becoming a foster or adoptive parent. Your county or agency will mail you an information packet.</p>	<p>Workers give you a realistic description of the children who are waiting for foster placement and adoption. Workers may become concerned if your main focus is on subsidy information or the adoption of young children.</p>
<p>2. Attend Orientation The process and the profile of the type of children who need homes is explained, as well as the different types of care—foster care, adoption, or resource parenting.</p>	<p>Workers explain the entire training, licensing, and approval process and describe differences and similarities among becoming a foster parent, a resource parent, or adopting. Orientation can be either a class or an individual meeting.</p>
<p>3. Complete Application When a social worker reviews your application and sees that the required basic information is in order, you will be placed in a training class.</p>	<p>Workers accept applicants 21 years or older, who do not have their own children currently placed in the foster care system, who have not committed any felonies, are chemically free, and have no major life changes in the last 12 months.</p>
<p>4. Complete Training You will learn about abuse, neglect, child behaviors, the county system, and how to help a child adjust to a new home. Foster parents also learn how to work with birth parents.</p>	<p>Trainers provide at least the minimum required training for foster parenting: 6 hours before the first child is placed in your home, with 12 hours per year in the future. Minimum required training for adoption is 18–20 hours.</p>
<p>5. Licensing/Home Study (3–6 mo. process) Required information includes parenting styles, family support systems, family of origin, medical reports, and marriage/divorce certificates (if applicable). Your criminal background and references are checked.</p>	<p>Workers assess your family and begin to build a relationship. Workers look for flexible families with good coping skills, not perfect houses. Your home is checked to see if it is safe and meets certain requirements.</p>
<p>6. Become Licensed or Approved Foster parents receive full or conditional approval, or denial. Pre-adoptive parents have their home study approved or may be asked to take further training before being approved.</p>	<p>Workers collect, review, and verify that all your paperwork is in order. They let you know what comes next in the process. The agency director or a third party and all people involved sign off on the file.</p>
<p>7. Child Referral You will receive a referral. A good match is important. Some children will be right for you and some will not. You may meet with the child's social workers, teachers, and therapists.</p>	<p>Workers make placements based on the child's needs and consider many families. If chosen, you meet with the worker to review child's profile. You should receive all known information about the child. Your information is shared with the child's worker.</p>
<p>8. Pre-Placement Visits (Adoption Only) You begin to build a relationship with the child. There will usually be at least 4 visits or visits every other month for up to a year.</p>	<p>Workers remain hopeful that the possible placement with your family is a good match, but watch for signs of conflict or trouble. The best interest of the child is the primary concern.</p>
<p>9. Child Placement You should get forms, releases, sibling visitation and doctor visit schedules, and care information. Foster parents may meet with birth parents, relatives, and/or previous foster parents.</p>	<p>Workers help prepare you and the child for transition and placement. Some agencies recommend a goodbye ritual for closure on the child's past and for future success with you. Workers complete an out-of-home placement plan within 30 days.</p>

Parent Perspective

It may be hard to decide between the different options, such as working through the county or with a private agency. Training session schedules and times vary, and you'll have to decide which option suits your needs. Questions such as asking for your last name, address, and social security number can feel intrusive, especially if you are just making an inquiry call. You may feel that the agency is screening you out.

Orientation helps you decide whether this is the right time to adopt or to become a foster parent. You begin to get a sense of the process, which can raise questions and concerns. You will learn about many possible workers: a trainer, intake, home study, and a placement worker. Learning so much and thinking about the process may feel confusing and overwhelming.

Filling out the application makes the process seem more real. Think about your child preferences and ask specific questions about the availability of children. Providing all the required personal information may deter some people. Some parents will have questions and want to proceed cautiously and others will want to speed ahead.

Training is an opportunity for you to begin to conduct your own self-assessment. Questions may arise: *Can I do this? Can I manage difficult behaviors? What are my rights and responsibilities? Are subsidies available?* Issues such as reactive attachment disorder, fetal alcohol effects/syndrome are not discussed in great depth. You have an opportunity to raise questions in class and discuss any concerns with your worker.

Licensing and the home study process is extensive and requires lot of work. You won't know whether you will qualify or if and when you will get a child referral. It will help to consider how adopting or becoming a foster parent will affect your family. You may feel as if you are under the microscope and that the details of your life are under scrutiny. The process takes time and you may wonder where things stand with your paperwork.

Once licensed or approved, you may feel satisfied but also anxious as you wait to receive a referral. You may feel frustrated regarding the lack of assurance about when you will get a referral and what type of child will be placed with you. Waiting is hard. You may ask yourself: *There are so many children in the system, why am I not getting a child?*

You may be excited and anxious to finally have a referral. This is the time to learn as much as you can about the child's needs and diagnoses before meeting the child and decide if accepting the referral is right for you. You may feel guilty saying no to a referral. A placement might fall through due to finding a relative for the child.

You will learn more about the child to help you prepare for a smooth transition and welcome the child into your family. You may build a relationship with past caregivers. You will think ahead about how to set clear boundaries. You can ask yourself what behaviors you are comfortable with and decide how to explain the rules for your household. Expect the unexpected.

The child may at first appear passive and seem to be making an easy transition. Sleep disturbances, traumas, and other issues will usually soon emerge and may be challenging. You may not have received full information about the child or been given the child's possessions. Your family will need to adapt to a newcomer as she or he adapts to you.

Coping Strategies

Check out the agency or county web site to learn more about foster care or adoption. Talk to a Minnesota Recruitment Project Parent Resource Developer in your area. (See the list on page 1.)

Ask questions. Talk to foster or adoptive parents to learn more about what the experience is like. Attend a parent support group meeting to listen, ask questions, and better understand the issues involved in this commitment. Remember why you wanted to help a child in the first place.

Think about why you began the process, how committed you are, and what your motivation is. Assess your situation to determine whether this is the right time for you to take care of a child who has experienced trauma and has special needs.

Take extensive notes and ask for a list of books on adoption, foster care, and children with special needs. Look for trainings and panel discussions with experienced foster and adoptive parents and professional trainers.

Complete any paperwork in a timely manner. Don't be afraid to ask your social worker why the county needs personal information about you and your family. Continue to learn more about foster care and adoption while you wait.

Become a respite care provider to get practice and experience. Look at the profile of waiting children and learn more about the type of children you are willing to take such as teenagers, sibling groups, or the medically fragile.

Inquire if there seems to be missing information about the child, such as placement history, birth parent visitation, or the likelihood of family reunification. If there is something you are uncomfortable with, don't move forward until you have the information you need.

Be creative while you wait by preparing the room for a child, purchasing bedding or materials for the child's lifebook, alerting doctors and dentists, or gathering insurance information.

Ask about your responsibility for upcoming appointments. Foster parents may ask to get the birth parents' visitation schedule and may want to set boundaries for those visits. Search out and join a parent support group and/or ask for a mentor.

Tips for Prospective Foster and Adoptive Parents

By Claudia Fletcher

Claudia Fletcher and her husband began their journey as foster parents early in their marriage. Today, they have nine children, and all but their 10-year-old son from Guatemala are from the foster care systems in Minnesota, New Mexico, and Washington State.

1. It's all about waiting. The world of foster care and adoption is all about waiting—waiting for returned phone calls, home study completion, a referral, finalization of adoption, judges' decisions. Social workers have many cases just as important as ours. That's hard to remember, especially since we think our family is the most important. Knowing how to stay calm and committed while you wait is an important skill to learn.

2. Social workers don't expect perfection. Perfect parents scare social workers because they know how quickly children from the system can destroy perfection. They appreciate a house that looks lived in and want authentic people who are honest about their own shortcomings.

3. Don't blow off what you hear. In our six years as foster and adoptive parents, nearly everything they warned us about has happened. We were naive and overestimated our ability to love children so much that they wouldn't destroy property, harm themselves, or hurt others. We also underestimated our ability to endure, accommodate, forgive, and change enough to live with these behaviors when they occurred.

4. It's not about us. When we first started foster care it was easy to feel offended. Why weren't we getting kids? Why were we told we were getting a placement and then later told we weren't? Why were other foster homes full, while ours was empty? Then I realized a lack of children found neglected or abused should bring me joy, not sorrow.

5. Flexibility is the key to endurance and longevity. In the early months of a placement, the emotional roller coaster we were on gave us wild rides.

When we became more flexible the ride was less exciting, but we were able to stay with it for the long haul.

6. Get as much information as possible. Everyone has questions and many parents are afraid to ask for fear of jeopardizing licensure or approval, but there are no stupid questions. Workers hope that parents have questions, and in fact are impressed when a parent has thought ahead enough to ask.

Resources

A Child's Journey Through Placement, Vera I. Fahlberg, M.D., Perspectives Press, Indianapolis, IN, 1991. This internationally known expert on attachment leads the reader through the child welfare system from a child's point of view, including separation from birth parents, to foster care placement, to emancipation, adoption, or reunification.

The Heart Knows Something Different: Teenage Voices from the Foster Care System, Al Desetta, Editor, Youth Communication/NY Center, Inc., NY, May 1996. Thirty-nine teenage writers who had to leave their birth families and find new families in the foster care system write about pain and loss, resiliency, and hope for the future.

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We encourage you to reproduce and distribute this newsletter.

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