



Beginners Guide to Foster Care

About This Guide

Becoming a foster parent is a major step to take.

It's a rewarding experience filled with joy — after all, you're helping to make a difference in the life of a child in need!

However, for some people looking to become foster parents, the journey may seem overwhelming at first.

Don't worry. You're never alone.

This guide has tons of answers to questions most new potential foster parents ask. After you read it, you can also join a free informational webinar to learn more about becoming a foster parent, ask more questions, or talk to a member of our team. We're here to help you every step of the way.

Let's dive in!



Foster Care Fact:

As of 2023, California is the state with the most children in care with 43,278. Conversely, Delaware has the least with just 595.

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Foster Care Tip:

When preparing to welcome a child in care into your home, personalization is key. Think about posters, decorations, and other items they can use to make their space their own!

Foster Care Basics

The best place to start with foster care is to discuss the basics. From requirements to the supports you'll have along the way, here's what you need to know.

Who Can Foster?

Almost anyone can become a foster parent!

There's not one specific type of person that can become a foster parent — they come from many different backgrounds and walks of life.

However, there are some qualities that help make it easier to provide the best possible care to a child. Some of these include:

- › Being dependable
- › Having empathy
- › Having great listening skills
- › Being patient
- › Having a sense of humor
- › Being a team player

If these are qualities that you see in yourself, you're on your way to becoming the best possible foster parent that you can be.





Foster Parent Requirements

Although fostering is open to most people, there are some requirements that need to be met.

They may vary by state, but in general, here are some of the requirements for becoming a foster parent:

- › A minimum age requirement (this varies by state from 18 to 25)
- › Completing foster care preservice sessions
- › Having a private bedroom for the child in care (sharing with another child may be okay in some states)
- › Having a dedicated income source from work or other income

Foster Care Fact:

Around 3 out of every 5 children in care are reunited with their birth parents after being in care.

The Difference Between Foster Care and Adoption

Foster care and adoption are two important parts of giving children in care a loving home environment.

However, the differences between the two are not always clear. Some people looking to become foster parents may not understand the differences and similarities between the two.

Commitment

The length of commitment in foster care and adoption is one of the biggest differences between the two forms of care.

- › Foster care is meant to be a temporary form of care.
- › The end goal of foster care is usually to reunite a child in care with their family, whenever possible.
- › The time spent in foster care varies — kids in care spend an average of around a year and a half in foster care, although this has decreased significantly in some states.
- › Time spent in care changes depending on the child's family situation and opportunities for adoption.

Adoption, on the other hand, is a permanent placement. Adoptive families intend to care for a child for the rest of their lives.

Foster Care Tip:

Never be afraid to ask for support — you're never alone as a foster parent! You can seek support from local or online groups and organizations, such as Mentor Foster Care.

Length of Time to Adopt

Although both forms of care involve providing a stable and loving environment for children to grow, the process of becoming a foster parent is much different than adopting a child.

- › The timeline for adopting directly through foster care is shortest, with a waiting period that could be as little as nine months.
- › Every child in care has a unique history that can make this process take much longer or much shorter than a few months.
- › However, the process still typically takes less time than domestic or international adoption.

Adopting a child outside of foster care is a much longer process.

- › Many of the same steps are required to ensure that children in care are placed in a home that will help them thrive — this home and family is for their whole lives.
- › For domestic adoptions or international adoptions, the timeline could be as long as seven years.



Costs

The cost of both foster care and adoption is very different.

- › In general, foster care costs are usually covered by the agency or the state — this includes preservice sessions and other steps for becoming a foster parent.
- › While you're fostering a child, you will receive a monthly stipend to help with the ongoing costs of caring for a child.
- › This amount will depend on your state, so it's best to consult the organization you're choosing to foster with.

With adoption, the costs are much higher to start — a domestic adoption or an international adoption can cost up to \$45,000 in some cases. Once you adopt a child, you'll also be responsible for any of the costs that come with raising a child. However, adoption through foster care can minimize the costs by a fair amount, with no cost up to \$2,500 in processing fees.

Foster Care Tip:

When you're deciding if you want to become a foster parent, ask the questions you need answers to — Mentor Foster Care, a part of the Sevita family, can help you decide if fostering is right for you.



Legal/Parental Rights

Parental and legal rights differ between foster care and adoption.

- › Children are placed in foster care by parents or the courts when help is needed to provide a safe home.
- › In most cases, parents keep their parental rights — even after children enter foster care.

There are some cases where the state may take legal custody of children in foster care and terminate parental rights, but in the majority of cases, the legal guardianship remains with their birth parents.

- › With adoption, applicants go through legal proceedings to be granted full custody of a child in care.
- › Once this is finished, the adoptive parents become the full-time parents of the child. Parental rights are no longer with their birth parents.
- › In the case of an open domestic adoption, birth parents may still develop relationships with and see their child after the adoption process is complete, depending on the rules of the adoption.

Foster Care Fact:

In foster care, it's best to keep siblings together, if possible. This preserves a family connection — especially during times of trauma.



Home Requirements for Foster Care

When you open your home to a child in care, you'll need to make sure that your home meets health and safety standards. This includes bedrooms, bathrooms, and any other indoor and outdoor space.

Let's look at some of those.

Bedroom Requirements for Foster Care

Every child in care needs a space of their own — a bedroom where they feel safe and can express themselves.

So, what can you do to provide the best possible bedroom space for a child in care?

Foster Care Tip:

One of the most important qualities of a foster parent is patience. A child in care may not trust you right away — give it time!

Here are some bedroom requirements to consider.

- › **Age-appropriate** – The bedroom should be right for a child’s age and gender — it should be a welcoming space that fosters a sense of belonging and comfort. For example, a teenager’s room should be different from a younger child’s room in terms of décor and furnishings.



- › **Safe sleeping space** – The bed should include a bed frame, a clean mattress, neatly made sheets, and cozy blankets. For infants, cribs need to meet safety standards, ensuring that they have a secure and comfortable place to rest.
- › **Storage space** – A bedroom needs to have enough space for a child’s clothing and personal items. For example, a roomy dresser or a closet with adequate space. Having the right amount of storage ensures that their belongings are kept neat, promoting a sense of ownership and comfort.
- › **Ventilation and Lighting** – Bedrooms should have proper ventilation to ensure fresh air and natural lighting to create a cheerful and healthy space.
- › **Childproofing** – Childproofing measures are needed for any child under the age of five. Ensure that the bedroom is free of hazards, with childproofed outlets, securely fastened heavy furniture, and any potential dangers removed from reach. Childproofing ensures that the child’s space is safe and secure, minimizing the risk of accidents.

Bathroom and Hygiene Needs

Your home should have proper bathroom facilities to meet the hygiene needs of a child in care and ensure privacy.

For example, bathrooms should be clean — regular cleaning and maintenance will be needed to keep bathrooms in good condition for a child in care. Fixtures, such as sinks, toilets, showers, and tubs should all be working and clean.

Lastly, privacy is non-negotiable — everyone needs privacy when using a bathroom. Bathroom doors should have working locks for this reason. But not key locks, though!

Kitchen and Food Services

As a foster parent, you'll need to prepare healthy, well-balanced, and age-appropriate meals. You'll also need to have enough food in the house to meet the dietary requirements of a child in care. You'll also want to consider specific dietary restrictions — some children in care may be living with conditions that need specific diets. They may also have specific diets based on their culture!



Safety Measures

A foster home should be equipped with all of the necessary safety measures — for example, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, lock boxes for medication, fire extinguishers, and childproofing where necessary.

Foster parents should be aware of potential hazards and take steps to reduce risks, ensuring a safe and secure environment for children in care.

Income Requirements

While it's true that foster parents are provided a monthly stipend specifically to help provide for a child in care, every state requires that foster parents have a source of income that meets the needs of the household.

There's no set minimum income — instead, a foster parent's income will be looked at individually to make sure that they can care for a child.



Foster Care Tip:

When you're getting ready to apply to be a foster parent, it's best to prepare any and all documentation that you'll need beforehand. Positive references, for example.



Different Types of Foster Care

Foster care is not a one-size-fits-all mission: the needs of every child are unique.

That's why there are different types of foster care!

Different types of foster care serve different needs that children in care may have. Here are a few different types of foster care.

Medically Fragile Foster Care

Just like foster care, medically fragile foster care helps children with parents who are unable to care for them.

However, medically fragile foster care involves children living with certain medical conditions that may need special care.

In most cases, foster parents of medically fragile children will need to go through specialized preservice sessions to understand how to properly care for children living with special medical needs. However, no previous medical experience is required to care for a child with complex medical conditions.

Therapeutic Foster Care

Therapeutic foster care, also known as TFC, is a special form of foster care that provides a temporary home and support for children with emotional, behavioral, or mental health needs.

These children have often experienced trauma or other hardships that have led to them needing extra support and guidance. TFC provides a safe, nurturing, and healing space for children. This is done using therapy, medication management, educational support, and other help a child may need to heal and move forward.

Understanding Trauma

Almost every child in care has experienced at least one traumatic event — with one in four enduring four or more types of trauma.

Many of these children may suffer with the effects of abuse and neglect, causing them to struggle with intense emotions, rage, or anxiety.

Their behaviors may present as aggression, difficulty showing emotions, or bad choices — they might not understand or have coping skills just yet.

When you're providing therapeutic foster care, here are some things to remember:

Foster Care Fact:

There are over 400,000 children in care in the US — these children need loving and caring homes to help them thrive!

- › **Be open and use positive body language** – Keeping an open posture and keeping your hands where a child can see them can help them feel more comfortable.
- › **Offer them positive feedback** – When a child succeeds or gets through their feelings, remind them immediately after the event! Even a simple fist bump or thumbs up can go a long way.

Emergency Foster Care

Emergency foster care provides short-term care for children who are at immediate risk with very short notice. Unfortunately, in some cases, this could be as short as a few hours of warning.

There are many reasons why a child in care may need emergency foster care, such as:



Foster Care Fact:

The average time spent by a child in care is around 20 months. The ultimate goal is to reunite them with their biological parents whenever possible!

- › Abuse or neglect
- › The home is unsafe
- › The child is in danger
- › Severe accident in the home, such as a fire
- › A loss of the home
- › A sudden illness or death in the family

In events like these where care is needed right away, emergency foster care is a safe option.

Every state has rules for emergency foster care, but it is short-term, generally lasting between 1 and 3 days.

When a child needs emergency foster care, a social worker will contact a list of emergency foster care providers. During an emergency foster care stay, organizations will make every effort to find a more permanent care solution. Typically, this is either a relative or finding the appropriate level of foster care that meets the treatment needs of the child.

Foster Care Tip:

Children in care often need more educational support than other children. As a foster parent, you can make a difference — prioritize helping a child in care with their schooling!



The Process of Becoming a Licensed Foster Home

Becoming a foster parent often starts with researching organizations dedicated to providing foster care services within your state.

For example, Mentor Foster Care provides foster care services in nine states, from therapeutic foster care to medically complex care.

Choose an organization you feel comfortable working closely with — their role is to help you navigate the foster care process and provide support throughout your journey.



Foster Care Tip:

States require you to take initial preservice sessions to help you learn how to be a better foster parent. However, we recommend taking more as the years go on — it never hurts to keep educating yourself!



Complete an Application

Once you've gotten in touch with a foster care organization, go through a screening process, and completed an informational session, you'll need to fill out an application.

The application process helps show that you meet the criteria to become a foster parent. In the application, organizations will gather information about you, some of which may include:

- › References
- › Household members
- › Income verification
- › A background check
- › Proof of minimum age required by your state

Applications may gather a lot of information about you, but it's part of making sure that children in care get placed in the best possible space for them.

Foster Care Fact:

Many think of young children when they picture foster care. But did you know that 36% of children in care are 11 years old and older? They need love and care, too!

Attend Preservice Sessions

After the application process, you will need to attend pre-service sessions. These pre-service sessions help prepare new foster parents for welcoming a child into their homes.

Preservice sessions can help future foster parents learn:

- › Therapeutic parenting skills
- › First-aid and CPR
- › How to nurture teens in care living with trauma
- › Independent living skills
- › Dealing with grief and loss
- › How to provide support for kids in care with complex behavioral and emotional needs

Pre-service sessions can help prepare foster parents to provide the best possible care.



Foster Care Fact:

The average age of a child in care is just over 8 years old. However, there are children of all ages in care.

Complete a home study

Before you welcome a child in care into your home, you'll need to complete a home study.

Home studies are important as they provide vital information about the foster family to ensure they are able to provide a child with a safe, stable, and caring home.

The home study process may look at your:

- › Social life
- › Relationships
- › Routines
- › Parenting experience
- › Family background
- › Physical, emotional, and mental health
- › Financial stability
- › And more

Diving more into the specifics:

State Regulations

Foster homes need to meet all state and local codes. They also need to comply with residential zoning, building, fire, and safety regulations.

Foster Care Tip

Becoming a foster parent is a big decision. Educating yourself as much as possible with resources like this ebook is a great place to start.



Unsafe Materials and Safety

Hazardous materials must be stored out of children's reach, and firearm safety measures are required in several states. Foster homes also need to have enough living space and safety features such as smoke detectors and fire extinguishers throughout the home.

Living Space

Foster homes must have enough space for living, eating, studying, and playing for everyone in the home, including children in foster care. Basic needs such as a working telephone, well-maintained appliances, adequate heat, lighting, and ventilation are needed. Additionally, the home must have a working bathroom with hot and cold running water.

Bedrooms

Foster homes must provide enough bedrooms for all family members in the home to make sure that every child has enough space for safety, privacy, and comfort.

Foster Care Tip

If you work with Mentor Foster Care, we provide all new foster parents with a fire extinguisher, a lock box, and a first aid kit.

The approval process typically takes anywhere from 3–6 months to complete. At the end, the report you get from the licensing agent may include information on additional sessions you need to become a foster parent.

Wait for your match

The foster parent approval process also helps organizations match your family to kids in care by learning more about you.

While every organization has a different process for matching kids in care to the right foster family, the organization you're working with may look at the following to make a match:

- › The child's input
- › Your parenting history
- › Your family's routine and interests
- › The location of your home
- › The makeup of your home
- › Your preference in youth
- › If you're open to fostering siblings



Foster Care Tip

Children crave routine — setting reasonable boundaries, rules, and crafting a daily schedule can help them thrive in care!

Preparing for a Child in Care

Once you've gone through the entire process of becoming a foster parent, you'll be matched with a child in care.

This is an exciting time — however, you'll also want to prepare yourself as best you can.

Here are some tips to help prepare for a child in care being placed in your home:

- › **Educate Yourself** – Always start with learning as much as you can — you can never know too much, especially when it comes to becoming a foster parent! You have many resources that you can use to learn more about being a foster parent—from preservice sessions to a wide range of articles from experts and organizations that help children in care. Feel free to ask questions, too!
- › **Evaluate your home** – You'll want your home to be a safe, nurturing, and welcoming place for a child to grow and thrive. Be sure that there isn't anything in your home that could cause harm or scare a child that you're welcoming into your home.
- › **Establish communication channels** – Every child is unique — especially in foster care. The best way to prepare yourself on how to best communicate with a child in care is to consult their caseworker assigned to them. That way, you can find out what they like and what their interests are — that can help you connect with them!

- › **Create a support network**
–“It takes a village” might be a cliché, but it’s true when it comes to becoming a foster parent. You can connect with other foster parents or support groups to seek help, share helpful tips, and learn from one another. Your family and friends can help, too. Even if it’s just to listen and allow you to talk about how things have changed.



- › **Gather essential supplies** – It sounds simple, but welcoming a child in care means that you’ll need extra everyday supplies! This can include things like toiletries, a toothbrush, extra food and snacks, books, age-appropriate toys, and anything else you can think of.
- › **Establish routines and boundaries** – Structure and consistency are essential for children in care — they provide a sense of stability and security that all kids need. Establish daily routines, including wake up times, mealtimes, homework schedules, and bedtimes.
- › **Access resources and services** – There are a ton of local resources and services available to foster parents all around the country—take advantage of them!

Foster Care Fact:

Every state has a stipend to help foster parents cover the costs of raising a child. Just remember: this is to help cover costs related to raising a child specifically. It’s not a secondary source of income!

Fostering Teenagers

When we think of foster care, for many of us, the first thing that comes to mind is caring for younger children.

However, the reality is that older kids and teens need the same love and care—they may have gone through difficult times, too!

Older children in foster care may have lived with trauma, abuse, or neglect, which can make it harder for them to trust and form bonds with adults. As a result, foster parents who take in older children must be patient and ready to build a bond of trust with the child.

Older children in foster care may also come with more complex emotional and behavioral issues that need support and care. They may have found their own ways to cope or to deal with trauma, which can show up as anger, aggression, or withdrawal.

Foster parents should be ready to work with the child to understand and solve these issues through therapy, counseling, or other forms of support.



Despite these challenges, fostering older children can be very fulfilling. By offering them a stable and loving home, foster parents provide a safe and nurturing place where the child can thrive and grow. They can offer the child the emotional support and guidance they need to overcome the hardships they've faced and move forward.

Foster Care Tip:

Being a foster parent can be challenging — lean on your loved ones and seek out all of the support you need!

Keeping Siblings Together in Foster Care

Fostering groups of kids or siblings is really important — it lets brothers and sisters stay together.

When they are kept apart, it can make them feel really sad and lonely. But when they are together in a foster home, they can help each other and feel like they are still a family.

Another benefit of fostering groups of children is that it can help children build important social and emotional skills. When foster parents take in a group of kids, it helps the kids learn how to get along with each other and share things. They can also be good friends and help each other when things are tough.

Foster parents who take care of a group of kids have a big job, but they also get to help lots of kids feel happy and loved.

Foster parents who foster groups of children or siblings have a chance to make a positive impact on multiple children's lives and create a sense of family in their home. They can develop meaningful relationships with each child, help them get through their challenges, and provide them with the support they need to succeed.





Next Steps

With the information in our guide, you'll be well on your way to becoming a foster parent.

However, for even more in-depth information, our upcoming webinar can help.

By attending a free Foster Parent Information Session Webinar, you can learn even more about becoming a foster parent and providing a safe, loving, and supportive home for a child in need.

Sign up for our webinar today!