Thank you for making the decision to learn more about becoming a foster family! The process of fostering can be an emotional and complex one, but it is also very rewarding. This packet has been specifically designed to provide you with information about foster care. As you read through the steps involved, keep in mind that the staff of the Coalition for Children, Youth, and Families are here to support, encourage, and assist you throughout your journey. You are welcome to call us at 414-475-1246 or 800-762-8063, visit our family of websites, or email us at info@coalitionforcyf.org at any time.
Getting Started

You probably have a lot of questions about how to start the process of becoming a foster parent. What are the requirements? What types of children are in foster care? What is the time frame for getting licensed? There are probably many more questions in your mind and we are here to help provide those answers for you.

What is Foster Care?

Foster care is the act of taking responsibility for children who are unable to live with their birth families or respective caregivers because of safety concerns, special care or treatment needs, or other circumstances. A child in foster care is a child who needs a temporary home in order to be safe and cared for. County human service agencies, and sometimes tribal or private foster care agencies, license foster families and oversee the children who are placed in foster homes.

Generally, placement in foster care is temporary and intended to give the child’s family time to make necessary changes so that the child can return to live safely in the home. Most children in foster care return home to their families. When children cannot return home, they find permanence primarily through guardianship or adoption by a relative or their identified foster/adoptive family.

Some of the basic responsibilities of a foster parent are:

• Provide a safe and nurturing environment.
• Promote normalcy, personal growth, and improve well-being by including children in the daily activities of the family and allowing them to participate in normal activities without agency barriers.
• Support contact between children and their birth families/caregivers; be open and flexible in working with birth families/caregivers to co-parent children, facilitate contact, and provide transportation to and from visits when possible.
• Advocate for children; communicate with the school and keep up on the child’s progress.
• Communicate and cooperate with your licensing worker and the child’s worker and treatment team regarding progress and concerns.
• Arrange and take the children to medical and dental appointments.

Children in Foster Care

Children in Wisconsin’s foster care system range between the ages of 0 and 18 (can be voluntarily extended to 21 for those who qualify). The amount of time a child will spend in foster care varies case by case. Some children are in care for one day, others for many years; each child’s case is different.

Children are placed in foster care for different reasons. Some examples include: a child who has been abandoned, a child who is at high risk of harm (the non-abused child in a sibling group), a child who is a victim of abuse or neglect, a child whose parent is incarcerated or hospitalized, a child who has significant medical or mental health needs, or a child who has committed a delinquent act.

The basic goals of foster care are:
• To protect the child from further abuse or neglect.
• To provide placement, stability, and normalcy for children.
• To provide consistent care and supervision that meets the child’s needs.
• To help the family make positive changes in order to work toward reunification.

Overall, foster care aims to keep children in a safe and positive environment.
Requirements
Minimum qualifications to become a foster parent include:

- You must be 21 years of age or older.
- You may be single, married, divorced, widowed, or be in a significant long-term partnership.
- You must be in good health and be willing to provide documentation from a medical professional.
- You must be financially able to provide for your family.
- You and your family must participate in the home study process, which will be completed by a licensing worker from the agency you are seeking a foster care license from.
- You must pass criminal background checks.
- Your home must be in compliance with standards established by the State of Wisconsin.
- You must be able to provide proof of insurance (e.g., homeowner’s or renter’s insurance and automobile insurance)
- You must complete proper training requirements within specified timelines; trainings may require travel at times.

Home Study
The State of Wisconsin requires the use of the SAFE Home Study licensing tool. During the home study process, you, as a prospective foster parent, will need to complete an application and participate in a series of personal interviews in your home. Your licensing worker will:

- Gather information about your parenting skills and abilities and learn what you have to offer a child(ren) who has been through traumatic experiences.
- Discuss with you the reasons you are interested in fostering and assess how fostering may impact you and your family members.
- Complete a thorough criminal background check on every member 10 years of age and older living in the home.
- Complete reference checks on your family.
- Inspect your home to ensure that it satisfies the State’s requirements to meet the needs of the children in foster care.

The home study also gives you and your family a chance to ask questions or voice concerns you may have.

Training Requirements
Training requirements are divided into three phases:

- **Pre-Placement:** To be completed prior to the placement of the first child in a family’s home.
- **Initial:** To be completed within the first period of licensure.
- **Ongoing:** To be completed every year of a foster parent’s license.

Time investment varies according to certification level.

Process
Your first step in becoming licensed as a foster parent is to contact the Foster Care Coordinator in your county or a private child placing agency. Once you have contacted the agency to begin the process, you and your family will be asked to complete an application if you wish to pursue becoming licensed as a foster parent. When your application is reviewed and accepted, you are ready to start the home study process.
**We Belong Together: A Family Story**

We are sisters and live together, but we don’t live with our brothers. We live in Wisconsin, and our brothers live in Illinois. A year ago, we were sent to foster care and separated from our older brothers. Our brothers couldn’t live at the same foster home as us because our foster mom only had room for two kids in her truck.

Kids are sent to foster care because either they or their parents need time to figure things out. We were sent because our mom needed some time to herself. Our foster mom is nice and gives us a lot of attention, but we miss our brothers.

It’s hard for us to keep close relationships with our brothers because we don’t see each other very often. Instead, we have to write letters and call each other on the phone. We are luckier than some separated foster kids because we get to visit our brothers about once a month. When we are with our brothers, we try to do everything together. They make us feel safe and loved and are the kind of guys you can count on whenever you need help or if you’re just lonely.

It is possible that we will never live with our brothers again, which makes us sad. But if we do live with them again, we will probably have a very good relationship because being away from each other makes us appreciate each other more. The time we do have together is very precious.

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**Sensational Sisters**

I am so glad that my parents participated in the foster care program. I still wish both of my foster sisters were in my family too, but I’m satisfied with my brother and sister right now. Who knows? I might get another foster brother or sister.

Written by a boy whose family chose to be foster parents.

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**Birth Parent Testimonial**

I was a young single mother and was having great difficulty parenting my overactive son. I began to do things that I still regret.

One day my child left for day care and did not come home to me. I was frantic because I did not know where my son was and did not have any contact with him for over two weeks. I felt that a part of me was lost and I did not know if I would ever get it back. I knew I wasn’t a bad person and that I had made mistakes, but I loved my son and wanted to do what was right. I just needed help. My son went to a foster family who helped us both. They cared about how I was doing as well as meeting my son’s needs. I have had my son back for three years now.

As you consider becoming a foster parent, remember that birth parents do love and care about their children. Please try to understand the circumstances the child’s parents are going through. With compassion and love in your hearts for the parents as well as their children, you will be an important part of rebuilding a family.
What it Means to be a Foster Parent

I learned that a parent's love is priceless and cannot be substituted, so I shouldn’t try. I also learned that healing their wounds did not heal their hearts. Stopping their hunger did not stop their longing.

To any new foster parent, I would like to say: “Each child is precious and unique and will need something different from you. Every child needs you to respect their birth family and their culture. No child needs you to save them, they just need you to hold them tight until the storm passes.”

My Experience in Foster Care

My life was rough growing up. I had an alcoholic father and a manic depressive mother. I had gotten into the wrong crowd and made a lot of bad choices.

After a time, my parents decided it would be best if I were to go to a foster home. When the day came I didn’t want to go. I just really didn’t want to leave home and be away from my parents. That is the day my whole life changed.

What helped most was having someone who made me believe in myself, who helped me to believe that I could do anything as long as I put my mind to it. I am so happy that there are families that open their hearts and homes to children in need, who are willing to offer a place for children to feel safe and cared for. I give my thanks to all foster parents for making the choice to make a difference in the life of a child.

Self Reflection

We know this is a lot of information to digest. You may be wondering if this is the right thing for you and your family. We recommend taking some time to read the articles and tip sheets noted in the Resource Appendix of this booklet. Take some time to assess your feelings. Consider what responsibilities you would take on as a foster parent and also the goals of foster care.

You may also want to ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I meet all the qualifications to become a foster parent?
- Am I patient, flexible, and do I have a sense of humor?
- How does my partner, child, and/or extended family feel about fostering?
- Can I handle having my family's way of life examined?
- Can I make the time to complete the home study process and commit to the required training that may call for travel at times?
- What ages, needs, and backgrounds of children would I best be a match for?
- Would I be willing to keep up with the latest training and look for resources when I’m stuck?
- Am I willing to work with birth families, including extended relatives, when appropriate?
- Do I have a solid support network or know how to connect with one?
- Will I be able to cope with the grief and loss when a child leaves my home?
- If a child in my care needs an adoptive home, would I be willing to consider adopting or helping him or her transition to a pre-adoptive home?
More Questions?

If you have more questions, please call us at the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center. We are here to help! You may also want to learn more about support groups in your area. You can find more information in the Resource Appendix below.

Please remember that Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center staff is here for you during every step of your journey.

Resource Appendix

The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center website, www.wifostercareandadoption.org, has several resources that may be helpful to you through your foster care journey. By exploring the website, you can find:

- The Wisconsin Foster Parent Handbook
- Access to our FREE Lending Library
- Tip sheets, current and archived newsletters, personal stories
- A calendar of events, including informational meetings, trainings, conferences, and family fun events
- Recorded trainings and resources
- Helpful lists (e.g., Agency list for counties, tribal, and private foster care licensing agencies, support groups)
- Other foster care and adoption related resources

If you need assistance in navigating the website, or if you are looking for additional information or resources, please call us at 1-800-762-8063 or 414-475-1246.
Our mission to inspire, inform, and support individuals and families caring for children and youth touched by foster care and adoption.

Families who use the Coalition services have:

| Increased access to tools and resources | Stronger networks of support | Improved confidence in their ability to be a “no matter what” family |

Because of our work, foster and adoptive families are strong and resilient—they are flexible, accepting, able to celebrate each victory, and endure lifelong.

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